OLIVER WELD BAYER

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

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FIRST EDITION

For Mother and Dad

CHAPTER ONE

THE GIRL AT THE CORNER TABLE took a cigarette out of the silver case her companion offered her. She said, "That's a beautiful gadget. Where did you get it?"

Her companion, a large man with blunt regular features and humorous eyes, put the case down on the white tablecloth and considered it. It was an unusual object of heavy gleaming metal with a delicately engraved border outlining the square shape of its lid.

"There's only one other like it in the world," he told the girl. "As a matter of fact I'm going to murder the guy who has it. When I get his, I'll make you a present of this one."

He put out his forefinger and flicked the case until it spun around on the table, catching the light from overhead and flashing.

The girl looked at him as she drew in on her cigarette. Then she blew out a puff of smoke and laughed.

"Don't go to so much bother," she said. "The old paper pack's good enough for me. Really."

"Oh, it's no bother." His voice was polite with reassurance. "It's a 'must,' as they say in the ads."

The large man sighed. It was midwinter in New York but he looked as if he'd recently come off a Southern beach. He wore a white shirt and against it his skin was a dark and sun-lazy color.

"Where's that imperious character who seems to be our waiter?" he asked.

"Search me," said the girl. Her eyes left his face and wandered over the mural on the wall beside them. They were in the Athenian Room of the Courtley Hotel and the mural was a scene depicting Ulysses shooting the suitors. It was early in the evening and only a few tables were occupied. The music stands of the orchestra, suitably enclosed by a sculptured plaster frieze, were bare and in shadow.

She was thinking, the months in the Florida hospital had been good for this man. The lines around his eyes were faint and his eyes seemed relaxed for once, and though she knew the long, curving scar was there beneath his clipped wiry hair, it didn't show. Suddenly the image of him lying in a Sicilian field with his head split open frightened her. He'd been so nearly dead, she thought. And she looked again at him, wanting to touch him to reassure herself, wanting to say something to show him she was glad. But he had turned around in his chair and was staring with irritation across the room.

"I want some more water," he said. "I wish those two waiters would break it up."

The two waiters stood together beside a fluted white plaster column. The shorter waiter, rosy-complexioned and white-haired, resembling the substantial gentlemen shown in whisky advertisements, gazed at the high ceiling and spoke softly.

"You are not a waiter. French you are, it is obvious, but you are not a French waiter. This is your first job, eh? You lied to Marcel, no doubt?" He shrugged. "Not that it matters. The war has brought many differences. Even that a man who does not know to remove plates from the right should work in the Athenian Room." He smiled graciously, the smile of the bank president contemplating the blended whisky. "How do you like the room? It is in honor of our brave friends, the Greeks. Once upon a time it was the Parisian Room, but alas, our French friends were not brave enough."

"That is a poor joke," murmured the other waiter. He was taller and younger than his companion, perhaps forty years old, his thick, dark hair thrusting up from his forehead, his black eyes set in deep sockets, and his cheeks hollowed from hunger or maybe trouble.

The older waiter didn't turn his head or alter his voice.

"It was extremely inconvenient for the management," he went on, "this apparent weakening of our French friends. To redecorate the Parisian Room into the Athenian Room cost a sizable amount of money."

At one of the occupied tables a man kept turning around trying to catch the older waiter's eye.

The younger waiter said, "The gentleman at the corner table wants something."

"Good. He will wait—and wait."

The younger waiter looked surprised. "But I thought——"

"You are mistaken, my mysterious friend. You have never been a waiter. You know nothing. I have been a waiter for twenty-three years, and I am only now beginning to find pleasure in it."

The man at the corner table was glaring at them, but the older waiter fixed his gaze across the room on the breasts of a plaster version of Venus and went on with his speech.

"It is unfortunate that the cause of my pleasure should be so sordid a thing as the war. But there it is. I didn't start it, did I? If the service is slow, if the steak is cold and the sherbet is warm, so it's the war, I tell them. Let them complain to Hitler. I pay back now for the twenty-three years of the gesture"—he made a slow, disdainful arc with his right hand—"for the tone of voice, the fuss, the whine—and after all this, for the tip!"

"The tip?" mumbled the other waiter, shuffling his feet. The man at the corner table made him feel uncomfortable.

"Not the ordinary acknowledgment, of course. I mean the ten-dollar bill, the two ten-dollar bills—out of all proportion to the check. Could you comprehend the humiliation in that? Could you?"

"I think so. The dog has danced well. Throw him a big bone?"

"Precisely." The three syllables were pronounced in an ascending scale of astonishment. "What did you say your name is?"

"Alexis Durand."

"Since you are an assumed waiter, I take it that is an assumed name?"

"Take it as you like."

The impatience of the retort did not put the older waiter off. He was having too good a time with this dark, glowering fellow who looked as if he should be eating dinner instead of serving it. Besides, the fellow was new and it was fair that he should go through an initiation of sorts.

"And what did you do before you came here pretending to be a waiter?" he asked.

I pretended to be alive, thought the other waiter, but he made no answer. He, too, stared across the room for a moment, his eyes blank and the curves of Venus bringing no light to them.

"A man of mystery, are you? Let me see—in the movies it would turn out that you are a convict escaped from French Guinea perhaps? But I do not think so. I have better ideas than the movies."

A jagged vein in the Frenchman's temple swelled to a visible and angry red but he only glanced in the direction of the man trying to secure their attention. Now the girl with him was looking at them too.

"Don't worry about them." The older waiter's voice was mocking. "They are waiting for the floor show anyway. The big one is Ralph Morley, the war correspondent. The woman's name is Eve Stokes. She's a photographer for a magazine. By the way, she's here to get some pictures of your famous countryman, Louis Lejeune."

At the mention of the name the younger waiter's eyes flickered. The interest in his voice was barely perceptible when he answered.

"Why does she want a picture of Lejeune?"

"She told Marcel her magazine is doing an article on night life in wartime. They will take photographs of all the entertainers at the big supper clubs. Then they will say to millions of people: buy our magazine, look at these naked chorus girls and relieve yourselves of war strain."

"But why Lejeune?" The younger waiter leaned back hard against the plaster column. "He is a singer."

"He helps war strain too. To be exact, the war strain of all the lonely ladies whose friends are in uniform across the sea. They say there is sex appeal in his ugliness. Myself, I do not see it." The older waiter gave forth a brief haw. "Naturally." He reached for a pitcher. "Well, I am going now. You will notice that I move at my own speed and inclination. If you are clever, you will do the same." He walked majestically toward the corner table—the chairman of the executive board bearing ice water.

Ralph Morley took a long drink from his newly filled glass. When he put it down empty he smiled at the expression on Eve's face.

"The desert did it to me," he explained.

"I was in the desert, too, and I can still bear a highball."

"But you traveled first class. Two lieutenants opening their canteens for you every hour on the hour. Didn't I see you ten miles from Oran drinking a Coca-Cola! Lord, you looked awful with that turban wound around your head like a bandage and your clothes all lumpy with film rolls and stuff."

"The lieutenants didn't seem to mind."

"I know. The tall one from Idaho asked me if you were engaged. I think he had it in mind to set you up on a farm with chickens and pigs. I told him you were allergic to the good earth and if he didn't believe it he'd have to fight me."

"He was sweet. Did he feel terrible?"

"A bit. I cheered him up some in a bar in Algiers."

"And now," she said, "you're trying to tell me you're only a cold-water drunk. How do you know it's not the temporary effect of your wound? Something pressing on the part of your brain that used to send out little messages for scotch, turning them into little messages for ice water?"

"No. I'm okay now. The doctors swore it. I mean if you marry me you don't have to be afraid you'll wake up some morning and find me making daisy chains."

"That's not what I'm afraid of."

He laughed, and the familiar wrinkles fanning from his eyes made her catch her breath. This was the laugh that she had heard and been comforted by in many strange places on the edge of Africa.

He had pushed aside the dishes on the table and was reaching for her hand.

"Darling, don't pick on me tonight," he said. "I'm leaving the day after tomorrow. I'm going over again."

She pulled her hand away and gaped at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "I told you I wanted a reassignment as soon as I knew when the hospital would release me. Well, the assignment's come through and so has the transportation."

"How does it happen," she demanded, "that I have been waiting for transportation overseas for seven months? My boss has been to Washington three times about me and even he can't do a thing."

"Oh. So that's all that's worrying you." He opened the silver case and took a cigarette. "I understand they've got all the photographers they want out there."

"Is that so? I've heard that the typewriters at the front are apt to drown out the guns—a million words a day and none of it as effective as a dozen good pictures——"

Ralph rubbed a match across the folder in his hands and held the flame for himself. "I wish," he said, "you could get as interested in my trip as you are in your own."

"What difference does it make to you what I'm interested in? If you wanted to find out you'd stay around for more than forty-eight hours."

"Now don't be female. You know I have to take the plane space whenever I'm lucky enough to be offered it. By the way, I wonder if you'd do me a favor. I'd intended to do it myself but there isn't time. You get around in various circles. Keep your eyes open for a cigarette case like this, will you? It's very important."

"What are you trying to do, make me an accessory to a murder?"

"Evie, I'm serious, completely serious. I'm not sure the case is in New York or in America even. That's why I'm going back. I've got a few more likely places to look."

"You're going overseas to hunt for a cigarette case!"

"If it weren't for that I'd take a month off and we'd get married."

As they were talking the room had been darkened and the floor cleared of dancers. A small ebony piano was pushed out to the center of the floor.

Eve reached for her camera. "So I'm competing with a cigarette case for your attention," she said. "That's a vicious triangle. Excuse me while I go to work."

She stood up, but there was so little light he could not see her face.

CHAPTER TWO

A BRILLIANT shaft of light shot down through the darkened room and splashed in a circle on the floor. A man stood in the circle singing, his head thrust forward to meet the light, as if he enjoyed the merciless glare upon his face, upon the pouches beneath his eyes, the vague snubbed nose, the wide, slit-like mouth almost without lips. Look at me, he seemed to be saying. I am grotesque. Yet you cannot resist me.

He stood in the midst of a room full of women and yet he managed to give each the certainty that he sang for her alone. The music and the words had been written for him by a little man sitting at a piano in his undershirt and sweating. They were poignant words full of nostalgia for Paris or Vienna or Rio Harbor, although the little man took his vacations regularly in Miami and French Lick. The music was tenderly erotic and full of love's awakening, although the little man had four children and a plump wife he didn't spend much time with.

But none of the women who sighed and listened to the singer knew of this or needed to. All they knew was that his voice had a whispering, intimate quality, his accent was foreign, and his reputation wicked. This irresistible combination packed the Athenian Room nightly and made Louis Lejeune a proper part of a national magazine article on entertainment.

As it happened, the efforts of the magazine to bring Lejeune to the masses were not appreciated by his audience. Each time a noiseless flash bulb lit the room there were affronted stares at the photographer. She was ruining the mood, the women complained, nudging each other.

Alexis watched from behind his tables. Now that the time had nearly come, he was composed. It had been the same in battle: a sickening nervousness before an engagement and then the cold control once it was under way. The revolver, absurdly small, made hardly a bulge in his jacket, and the folded note lay flat in his breast pocket against his starched white shirt.

The plan was clear in his mind, each part of it following the one before in an order as familiar to him as the streets in the town of his childhood. Behind the orchestra's stand was a door, and behind the door a corridor; the last dressing room on the corridor was Louis Lejeune's. Alexis had already discovered that the doorknob had been incorrectly installed. One must twist it to the left to release the catch. Inside, the make-up table and its clutter faced the door. There was an advantage to this: Lejeune's back would be turned when Alexis entered, and before he could make a move the revolver would have him covered. First there was the matter of the note. It would take Lejeune a moment or two to read it. By that time, out on the dance floor, the chorus girls would be swinging into their military tap routine, very fast, very noisy. Then things would proceed with dispatch. The way out was equally planned: the coat and hat lying ready upon a bench in the waiter's locker room, the service elevator to the top floor, a quick walk down the hall, and the descent in a front elevator, the fine carelessness of the stroll through the lobby to the street.

Yes, it was all as clear and orderly as the sequence of the streets back home. Some of their names crowded back to him: Rue Saint-Denis, Rue Vivienne, Rue de l'Orangerie. For a moment he was a little boy again walking to school, kicking the leaves, swinging his books in their leather strap. And now he was past the middle of life and planning to murder a man.

Louis Lejeune bowed to his applause and began a new number. Alexis watched the photographer approaching closer to the singer and sitting on the floor to aim her camera up at him. She wore a black skirt and a white blouse with metallic threads in it that caught the light. Her short hair hanging straight to its tips caught the light, too, and made a shining cap for her head. To Alexis she resembled a child out of the past, a child in a black-and-white school uniform seated in much the same way on the rug with her books. If that child were alive now and grown older she might look like this girl. He found himself admiring the photographer's lithe movements as she contorted her body to get the right angle for a shot.

But that lasted only an instant, and then he was regarding her coldly for what she was—a menace to his plan. What if she should follow Lejeune to his dressing room after his song? What if she meant to ask him to pose some more for her, or to interview him? What if she made the entire evening useless, so that the revolver must remain untouched until some other time? Alexis felt he could not bear it if the thing were not completed now in the next few minutes. By the following night much could go wrong. Lejeune might see him around and recognize him. He himself might be fired. The opportunity would have to be arranged all over again.

He heard the loud sweep of the applause and the dreaded thing was happening. Lejeune turned and walked with the photographer to her table. The man sitting there neither rose nor shook hands. Lejeune stood stiffly for a moment, talking. It is not yet too late, thought Alexis. If he goes now—if he goes to his room now——

Lejeune left the table and started weaving among the crowded tables directly toward Alexis and his domain in front of the mural. Numb with amazement, Alexis waited. Beside him, seated on a leather banquette against the wall, were two women, neither young nor old, neither plain nor beautiful. Jewels gleamed at their throats and wrists, and soft, satin-lined furs were thrown behind them. In one awful flash of certainty Alexis realized they were waiting for Lejeune. The pattern was repeating itself without variation. Why should it be any different in New York than in Paris? Since when did Louis Lejeune not make himself acquainted with the richest women in any city in the world? Since when did he return to his dressing room without presenting himself at their tables? This meant only that Lejeune was acting like himself. Alexis breathed out a swift curse at his own naïveté, but before he could take a step the singer was already at the table raising the ladies' fingers to his lips.

"Waiter"—Lejeune spoke to the immobile shirt front standing near by, not looking at the face above it—"we will order now."

Suddenly the orchestra struck up a brisk march and the chorus girls in olive-drab satin tights began the military tap number. Alexis stepped forward. This was the moment he had calculated to meet Lejeune's eyes above the black threat of a gun barrel. Instead, in his outstretched hand he held a tasseled and engraved menu and above it their eyes met.

"I don't like that gent," said Ralph Morley, watching Lejeune across the room, talking to the two ladies.

Eve nodded. "That was obvious enough. What's the matter with him?"

"There were rumors. It seems he overdid the 'show-must-go-on' stuff in France. His show 'went on' for the Nazis too. There was some stir about him though they never proved anything, never could get the evidence. Something to do with codes and theater programs. It seems he'd have the titles of his numbers printed up in a certain order but on some evenings he'd sing them in a very different sequence. Then a few people in the audience would be arrested for questioning, to put it delicately. The arrests happened to occur on the evenings Lejeune got temperamental about the order in which he wanted to sing his songs."

Eve's eyes narrowed. "Intriguing coincidence."

"So a lot of people thought—but they never proved anything. Lejeune was admitted to this country as a refugee from the Nazis. I think he was a refugee from the lack of caviar in Paris." Ralph picked up the cigarette case and rubbed his finger over the engraved border on it. "Speaking of codes, look at this."

Eve took it from him and scrutinized it closely.

"What does it look like to you?" he asked.

"Like—like a design, little symmetrical shapes, and curlicues and flower shapes and leaves——" She stopped and looked up at him. "Why?"

"You're right. That's what it looks like and that's what it is. But there's another case like this with a similar design except that the figures on it mean something. I knew the fellow who made the two of them. He was a jeweler and a silversmith in Paris. A great artist and a great man. He's dead."

"That's the case you're looking for?"

"Yes."

"What kind—can you tell me what kind of information is on it?"

"No. Not now. Not till I find it."

"But it is important?"

"I don't know the words to tell you how important it is."

"You said it might be anywhere in the world. It's like looking for the needle. Why, it might be buried six feet underground somewhere."

"No. Whoever has it will be putting it to the use it was meant for soon—especially if the war news continues bright for our side. There is a buried treasure in this story but the case isn't it."

"Sounds like the Rover Boys," she said, "but okay. From now on I carry no cigarettes of my own. I'll borrow from everyone. I'll get a dreadful reputation."

"Not with me. Here." He flipped open the case and offered her its contents. Questions that she wanted to ask him clanged through her mind but the sober set of his face stopped her. He seemed very far away and preoccupied, and instantly more than anything else she wanted to recall him, to make him aware of her.

"Are you still such a terrible dancer?" she asked.

Louis Lejeune did not eat the steak he had ordered and one of the ladies sitting with him inquired if he were ill. No, he said, not ill, only tired. Immensely tired. Have a drink, they urged, a drink would fix him up fine. But they knew he should not drink, he reproached them, it was bad for his voice. Ah, he was a most exhausted person, he said, and he would like a long rest. It had been a strain—all those weeks on that ghastly boat from Lisbon to Buenos Aires, unwashed people packed in it like cattle. Perhaps they did not realize that traveling was quite different from the old days. Luxury staterooms and swimming pools, fresh orchids and champagne—all things of the past. He sighed. It was horrible how everything had changed.

Well, after the war, they soothed him, things would be the way they once were. People simply weren't going to stand for discomforts after the war. They themselves were crazy to travel again, but they supposed Europe wouldn't be fun right away, right after. Perhaps they'd try South America. Perhaps even Buenos Aires, if Monsieur Lejeune recommended it. They looked across the table at him, their eyes very clear and trusting.

Lejeune had an immediate vision of them promenading the first-class deck of a dazzling white cruise ship. In his fancy they wore white silk dresses and white pumps on their narrow, expensive feet. The sun was shining and the steward was approaching them with the midmorning cup of hot bouillon. Did they really think the armistice need but be signed and the ship would be afloat again, the baggage on the pier, the dining-table assignments ready?

Well yes, he could recommend Buenos Aires, Lejeune told them, it was a city full of handsome Gauchos. They must learn to tango before they went, and they must learn to be generous. Those dark-skinned cowboys were proud and not put off with a smile or a nod.

The ladies giggled. "Waiter," ordered one of them, "bring Monsieur Lejeune a whisky and soda. He's in a funny mood."

Lejeune heaved his shoulders in a gesture of resignation.

"Bring the bottle, waiter." His eyes rolled up at Alexis, mute slits above their pouches.

He drinks now, exulted Alexis, hurrying toward the bar. Then the pattern commences to crumble, the behavior is unusual. He is frightened.

A half-hour and several drinks later Louis Lejeune arose from the table.

"Where are you going?" cried one of the ladies, agitated, plucking at his sleeve. When he removed her hand, he felt the skin of it, dry and grainy like the skin of a claw.

It was their fault, he thought frantically, the fault of all the women with money and hands like claws. They had beckoned him and bought him and now they were killing him. He closed his eyes. He could not recall the time before there had been rich women. The wife of the waiter (who was not a waiter) belonged to such a time, but he could not remember when it was, or where.

"I must go to my dressing room," he began.

"But, Louis, it is almost an hour before your next show!"

"I must lie down. The whisky—I am not used to it."

They laughed merrily.

"Like a little boy on his first bender," said one. She waggled her finger. "And everyone tells us you have a long and naughty past."

Lejeune bowed. "Alcoholism is too simple, chère madame. I am a master of more complicated kinds of deviltry."

Their laughter, full of anticipation, floated after him as he started through the room. From the corner of his eye he saw Alexis begin to move too. Just a few minutes more, he thought, and the realization of what was coming staggered him so that he grabbed at a chair to keep from falling.

When his eyes opened he saw that the chair was at the photographer's table and her startled face was looking up at him.

"Monsieur Lejeune," she said, "are you ill? Can we help you to your room?"

"No," he said; "it is nothing at all."

The man with her offered his assistance.

"Please no," said Lejeune; "please do not trouble. I am going to lie down for a moment and——"

"Would you rather not pose for the rest of the pictures tonight? I can come some other time," suggested the photographer.

In the dimness several feet away Lejeune saw Alexis waiting, the ever-present menus in his hands. No, they were not menus. They must be theater programs. That was it. Now the memory was beginning to bubble up in him. He had seen with his own eyes those programs being burned and yet here they were in the hands of a waiter who was not a waiter, who was going to kill him because of them.

"I am really quite all right," he insisted, his mind busy with the image of his dressing table. The gun, its handle bearing the two jeweled *Ls*, lay in the second drawer. If they had the theater programs, he thought, they knew everything. Even if he got rid of this one, this masquerade of a waiter, there would be others, they would catch up to him in the end. He would raise his eyes over a newspaper, over a cup of coffee; he would look into a shop window or a taxicab and sometime another pair of eyes would meet his and there would be no escape.

"I am all right," he murmured once more. He nodded absently to the two at the table, and left them. He walked toward the orchestra stand, the figure of the waiter moving along behind him. Yes, there was one escape after all, if he had time enough—just the matter of a moment if he were fleet enough. He would turn his back to the door while he did it, he thought, then even if his pursuer came upon him too soon, he would not have to see the image of what he had become mirrored in that face again.

Alexis heard the shot while he was still in the corridor. It made a small staccato boom in the narrow space. The other doors did not open; the orchestra played on; by some miracle no one seemed curious. He sprang at the door and went in. The body lay crumpled untidily on the floor. There was no more dignity in the way it lay than if the gun shot had come from a firing squad, and this pleased him. He felt a vague regret that the thing he had prepared for months to do was snatched from him and done of itself, but that was not what mattered. Lejeune was dead and had died understanding why. Now it must be made certain the others understood. Alexis removed the note from his breast pocket and bent down. His attention was caught by the glint of the gun on the floor where Lejeune had dropped it. It lay close to the dead man's limp, open hand, the gaudy jeweled monogram sparkling. So this was the gun that had once been described to him, the vulgar gift of an admiring *Fräulein* in search of adventure. Well, it had come to a good use after all. Alexis lifted Lejeune's evening jacket and his fingers slid searchingly along the lining. He was about to place the note in the pocket slit when the room was filled with a silent blinding flash and he jerked his head up to face a camera and the slender girl behind it. Their gaze met for barely an instant before they were jostled out of the way by a half-dozen peering, pushing chorus girls, and someone was saying, "I could have sworn I heard a shot." Then there was a loud theatrical scream and someone else said, "Lejeune's shot himself. Get a doctor."

CHAPTER THREE

LATER Eve remembered flashes of detail out of the confusion that followed: the furious, startled eyes of the waiter when he turned and saw the camera; a chorus girl with one hand clapped over her mouth to stifle an outcry, and how red and long her nails were against her pale cheek; the way Lejeune's stiff shirt front ballooned out as they placed him on the couch, and a short while after the doctor saying without even touching him, "This man is dead." Through it all the orchestra had played and the patrons danced on, oblivious. Lejeune had died as he had lived, to the sweet, insinuating tune of a torch song.

Still later, when the police came and the sergeant was asking questions, the waiter had looked past the blue uniform, at Eve. His eyes were on her with desperation and hatred as he told his story: how he had heard the shot and found the body. If she were going to speak—that was the moment to do it. In her imagination she could hear her own voice breaking in, saying to the sergeant, "Don't be too sure Lejeune killed himself. When I walked into this room, I saw . . ." She clutched her camera with its telltale film tighter and opened her mouth, but the words didn't come. Some odd compulsion in the waiter's expression kept her quiet. Perhaps it was only pity that made her lean against the wall and wait. Part of the scene was not unfamiliar to her. Many times before she had been on the spot directly after a murder—murders more spectacular than this with the killer unknown and at large. What did it matter whether she spoke or not, she thought. They would find him out soon enough. There was no triumph in being the first to point a finger at this white-faced fellow with the gravy spot on his shirt front. Her mind played casually with his possible motives: a woman, a humiliation, an old grudge.

A young policeman was emptying Lejeune's pockets. The keys, the lighter, the few pieces of silver made a glittering clutter on the table. Finally he found the folded square of paper. The sergeant took it from him and his brow wrinkled. He glanced around the room.

"Anyone here read French?"

Eve spoke up quickly. "Ask the waiter. He's French."

She thought it must be a faked suicide note and she expected some show of guilt from him, a hesitation of the hand that reached out for the proffered paper, a swelling of the telltale vein at the side of his head. But the waiter's voice was calm and distinct as he translated the four or five lines. When he had finished there was a silence in the room. Then the sergeant looked toward the body on the couch and rounded his lips in a thoughtful whistle.

"Can you beat it?" he asked. "Frog politics! I don't know what goes on with those Frenchies, but they were sure out to get this baby for something. He must have been plenty scared to jump the gun on them like this."

Eve only half heard him. The words of the note were echoing in her startled ears. She stared at the waiter and tried to adjust to this situation so extremely different from the one she had imagined. She recalled the photographs she had seen in the newspapers from time to time, the captions always the same:

A clandestine newspaper of the French underground has passed the death sentence on (whoever it was in the picture) on a charge of collaborating with the Nazis.

There had been stories circulating in North Africa when she was there of how some of those death sentences had been carried out, and now here she was in New York witnessing one that seemed the most daring of all. She wanted to give the waiter a sign, to assure him she would say nothing, but he was looking down at the note still in his hand; he seemed to have forgotten she existed.

At that moment there was a commotion in the corridor and she saw Ralph's dark, scowling face as a policeman blocked the door.

"What's going on in there?" he called to her. "Are you okay?"

"Okay," she said. "I'll be right out." She turned to the sergeant. "Is it all right if I leave now? You know how to reach me when you want me. At the *Photonews* magazine office, or my apartment." A sudden thought came to her and she repeated loudly, "Miss Eve Stokes, 304 East Fifty-seventh Street."

The sergeant nodded, and she picked up her camera and pushed through the little throng in the room. It was too risky to look back at the waiter but she knew he must have heard her.

"I have to call the boss," she explained to Ralph. "Lejeune killed himself."

"Does that mean you're going to be busy tonight?"

"I'm afraid it does. Job comes first, you know. That's one thing I learned from you."

"Evie, I was sent to report on a war and——"

"I know," she said. "This is just tabloid stuff, but it's all I can get."

They were walking through the lobby toward the telephone booths. She got into one and snapped the door shut.

Newton Trout's familiar hello answered after several rings.

"Did I wake you?" she asked. "I merely want to tell you what you're going to read in the papers tomorrow."

"Who's suing us?" he inquired instantly.

"I told you I've reformed. I always ask permission now before I take a picture. That's why I won't have many of Louis Lejeune for you tomorrow. He's dead."

"What happened? Did the girls tear him to pieces?"

"He shot himself—according to the police."

"How come?"

"I don't know. Between shows he went into his dressing room and blew his brains out."

"So?" She could imagine his face settling into its customary lines of calculation. He was a man nearing sixty, gray-haired, with a large, sharp, wrinkled face. All the vitality seemed to have drained out of him into his publication, which he handled like a bold youngster. He had an especial flair for the sensational, and a story like the one she was contemplating would be his meat.

"I suppose you got a shot of the body," he said, "the dressing room, the weapon, the women beating their breasts?"

"No. There weren't any hysterics. None of the customers knew he did it. I was just going in to see him when a waiter discovered his body."

"You didn't do it, did you?"

"Yeah. I shot him with my little Graflex. What I called to tell you is that we'll have to hold up the article and change the layout."

"What pictures did you get?"

For one fleeting instant she was tempted to tell him of the picture she thought she had, of the story she might get, but she held back. In a few hours she'd have the evidence and she wanted no confusion in Newton's mind about where the story credit belonged. If she gave him even a hint now, he'd take over, and from then on it would be exclusively his own.

"I got a few shots," she said, "but all alike. That guy had only one expression on his face—'Come and get me.' "

"I don't see why you haven't a picture of the body. Where the deuce were you when it happened?"

"In the Athenian Room. He didn't tip me off when he was going to do it." Hastily she tried to put together an alibi. "Besides, the police weren't very co-operative, so——"

"Are you trying to tell me that you didn't get a picture because the police said no? Considering some of the things you've done when the police said no before this, that sounds pretty funny."

"Well," she said, realizing why he was annoyed, "I've had a plush evening on the expense account. I don't mind giving you a few laughs."

"Now wait a minute, Eve, you can't blame me for wondering——"

"I don't blame you, boss. Sweet dreams." She hung up the receiver gently.

She came out of the booth and took Ralph's arm.

"Anything bothering you?" he asked.

"I guess I'm just sick of this cutthroat man's world. If you'd offer to set me up in a kitchenette, I think I'd accept."

"Do you mean that?"

"No." Her mind was already springing ahead, trying to figure things out. The Athenian Room closed at two-thirty, and if he were clever enough to avoid any unusual action, the waiter would stay till closing time. That meant he would be at her apartment asking for the picture by three. By morning the police would surely discover that Lejeune’s death was no suicide. They would be hunting for the waiter. But he must not be a waiter at all! Who was he? Worry stirred in her for the first time. She had made the way clear for a desperate and totally mysterious man to come to her apartment. She was concealing evidence. She was getting involved with a killer.

“We’ll get a cab,” Ralph was saying as he held her coat for her, “and while you’re developing the pictures, I’ll scramble eggs.”

“Not this time,” she told him. “The icebox is empty, and besides I really have to get at these.” She patted her camera. “Newton will be calling about the layout first thing in the morning and we have a noon deadline. You ought to know how it is, darling.”

“That,” he commented with crispness, “is the first time this evening you’ve addressed me civilly.”

“What did the police want of you?” asked the white-haired waiter, his eyes on the swaying and posturing of the couples on the dance floor. He was standing with Alexis beside the same Doric column as before.

“Just to ask a few questions,” Alexis told him. “How long after I heard the shot did I find the body? Was it lying in this position or in that position? Was he already dead? Did he tell me why he killed himself?”

“Characteristic,” commented the other. He smiled. “Do you think he did it for love? Over a woman?”

“As I told the police—Lejeune did not confide in me.”

"Well, for my part"—the white-haired waiter's voice was full of disgust—"I should say he sang himself into it. He had a very melancholy repertoire. So now all the ladies will have to wipe their tears and look around for a new crooner." He threw a jaunty little kiss out into the air. "So long, Louis."

The orchestra finished one number and began another. The dancers pressed together again and moved about the floor. Alexis kept his eyes on them, too, and made his voice as casual as possible.

"I want to ask you," he said, "do you know anything about the photographer who was here from the magazine?"

"Eve Stokes? Everyone knows all about her. Last year she took a trip to the battle zones with her camera, and became a personage." The white-haired waiter surveyed the room. "She is not here now."

"I know," said Alexis. "I heard her tell the police sergeant she was going home—the—the incident must have upset her."

"Upset!" Alexis' colleague clicked his tongue in derision. "A little bullet hole in the temple did not upset that one, my friend. She has seen a soldier's leg blown off by a mine and photographed the result with the most stunning technique. It would not surprise me if the so-called spirits we have to serve these days upset her, but never, I assure you, the suicide. She used to specialize in portraits of men." The older waiter squinted at Alexis. "If that is what you are contemplating, I feel I should warn you that she is expensive. She could make even you look sleek and prosperous, but she will charge you for it."

Alexis was no longer listening. He had heard her give the police sergeant her name and address: Eve Stokes, 304

East Fifty-seventh Street. He remembered his coat in the locker room and his plan about the elevators. He would carry it out for caution's sake.

"I have some orders for the bar," he told his companion. "See you later."

The older waiter held him by the arm. "I explained to you, my friend, that it is ridiculous to hurry. There is a war on."

Alexis snatched his arm away. "I have no time to lose," he said roughly.

He hurried out to the kitchen and through it to the lockers. All the time he was getting out of the hotel and searching for Eve Stokes's apartment his own words kept ringing in his head: "I have no time to lose."

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE DIM PURPLISH LIGHT of her darkroom Eve bent over the picture floating in the hypo bath. As she stared at it through the gentle movement of the solution it seemed to have an unreal posed quality like the pictures that illustrated confession magazines. The camera had caught the profile of the waiter, his chin and underlip thrust forward in a bitter determination, his fingers slipping the folded note into the dead man's pocket. The head of the dead man showed, too, pressed like a listener's to the carpet. A trickle of blood made a crooked black path from his temple to his ear. She picked the photograph up carefully by its corner and laid it on absorbent paper to dry. Then she closed the darkroom door and went out into the studio. She stood hugging herself with her arms, looking into the fireplace. The ashes were gray and powdery and the wind rattled the windows and threw gusts of sleet against the glass. Kneeling down, she began to pile up some wood for a fire, smiling at herself. As if I'm making the place cozy for a friend, she thought.

As she was holding a match to the kindling someone knocked on the door. She hesitated, her heart pounding in her throat. The knock came once more, short, commanding. She went to the door and pulled it open. He was standing in the hall, his shoulders glistening with snow, the brim of his hat pulled down and dripping, below it the haunted face with its drawn cheeks and fierce eyes.

"Come in," she said.

He stepped inside, pulling the door shut after him and leaning against it. His eyes swept in a suspicious circle through the studio. He had all the mannerisms of the hunted, she thought. Aloud she said, "There is no one else here."

"I have come for the film," he said.

"I know." She glanced at his shoes making wet grayish spots on the rug.

"If you will give me the film, I will go quickly and your beautiful rug will not be ruined any further."

She was about to protest, to say that that was not at all what she had been thinking, but she saw his mouth twitch in a half smile and in an instant her image of this interview crumbled. There was to be no fireside pouring out of confidences by the shabby and bewildered fugitive into the ears of the smart, suave, Lady Bountiful photographer. There were to be no favors given or accepted. Many people of all kinds had walked into Eve Stokes's studio but none had seemed more strange to her than this man. He looked like the shell of a human being. She had a notion that if she touched him he would seem brittle and cold to her fingers.

"I'll get the film for you," she said. She went to the darkroom, conscious of his eyes on her back, sorry that the robe she had changed into was so fashionably cut. It was not the thing in which to receive a French patriot whose shoes were frayed and paper thin. She brought out the film and the still-damp print and handed them to him.

He studied the picture.

"Louis looks quite satisfactory," he said. "I did not have time to appreciate with what correctness he did my work for me." He crumpled the film and picture tightly in one hand and stuffed them into his pocket. "I hope I do not deprive you of an interesting souvenir." He gestured at the walls of the room. "I see that you have a great many—would one say—more appealing photographs."

"It depends," she said. "Anyway, you might thank me."

He nodded. "One forgets the conventions. It has been so long since I have thanked anyone for anything. Why did you do it?"

"Why did I take the picture?" she asked, deliberately misunderstanding. "Reflex action. I saw a dramatic moment. I snapped the shutter."

"Why do you give the film to me instead of to the police?"

"That's easy. You're holding a gun." She pointed to his right hand plunged deep in the pocket of his coat. He drew his hand out empty.

"I am very foolish," he said. "I have no time to be curious, but it pesters me—why did you not mention the picture and the incident to the police when we were all in the dressing room?"

"I do not work for the police, monsieur. Besides, I thought if I did not, you might come here and——"

"And you could make me a proposition for exclusive rights to my story for your magazine?"

"Not entirely." She ignored his sarcasm. "Please believe that I want to be your friend. When I heard you read that note, I understood what you are. I want to help you."

The passion in her face, the sweet, unfamiliar words, the warmth of the log fire made a dead emotion come alive within him again. He had been full of hatred and solitary for so long. He wanted to sit down in the square soft chair just there within reach of his hand; he wanted to talk and to sleep and to forget. He thought, I could open my eyes and find this girl is Denise grown up and everything has been a dream. But his gaze left hers and traveled downward. He noticed how the silk robe lay richly along the lines of her body and how perfectly lacquered her fingernails were. He shrugged, and his voice was accusing.

"How could you help me?"

"Some money. A place to hide. An airplane ticket out of the country maybe. I could manage it. I have friends, and——"

"But why should I leave?" he objected. "I have things to do in this city."

"Don't you understand the police will be hunting you here? They are efficient at this sort of thing, and you couldn't possibly evade them. You have been stupid enough to run away from the Athenian Room before closing time—that makes you seem all the more suspicious. If you don't get away at once you will be picked up before tonight."

"No." He shook his head, and his lips stretched into a vague taunting smile. "I am afraid it is you who does not understand. I am not as important as that. Just a French waiter who found a dead French singer with a note written in French in his pocket. They may wish to ask me some further questions, but they will not make much of it if they don't find me."

"This is America," she said. "In America even those who most deserve it are not permitted to be murdered."

"But you are wrong. I did not murder Louis." He saw her expression. "You need not take my word. There are such things as fingerprints and tests for powder burns on a hand that has discharged a gun and so forth. You will see in the newspapers in a few hours that the police are satisfied that Louis committed suicide, as indeed he did. It is true I meant to kill him, but, as the sergeant said, he 'jumped my gun.' So I have no need to leave this city, do I? I had no need even to come to you for the film. Yet if things go badly in the next few days it will not be comfortable to have my picture available. I decided to risk coming." He bowed slightly. "You must be thanked for making it so charming and unrisky."

She said, "Wasn't it a rather dramatic risk—to leave that note even after Lejeune could no longer read it?"

His eyes filled with fury again as she had first seen them. "On the contrary. It was of the highest necessity. The note will be printed in the papers. The others will see it. Let them be tortured by it before they die."

"Others? Others that you're going to——"

She caught her words up in a gasp as she saw his body sag. He took a few steps toward the nearest chair and slumped into it. She was frightened at the blue tinge of the skin around his mouth and his terribly still closed eyelids.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What can I do? I'll get some brandy——"

He shook his head. "It has been this way with me all evening. It was the food there, the smell of the food."

"You're hungry!" she cried. "You're starving hungry!"

"I think so. I haven't paid much attention. I——"

She didn't listen to any more. She left him and ran into the kitchen, thanking God for the cans of soup that were there, and the toaster that worked.

When the food was ready and steaming upon the table she went back into the studio to call him. He lay as she had left him, his eyes closed, the absurd black bow tie twisted in his collar. She studied his face before she spoke. It was a sensitive face, and it bore the marks of much living. The faintly pulsing vein in his temple, the furrows in the gaunt flesh of his cheeks, the mouth no longer compressed, but slack and gentle as a child's—these made a kind of cipher that she longed to read. Who was he, and what had he been that he dedicated himself now to killing and revenge? Who were those others he had spoken of, the ones who were about to die? He sighed, and his eyelashes that lay like ink strokes along his white cheeks stirred a little. Lying there, he looked like a man who had had till now no real business with hate and violence. What would happen to him? He would eat and go, and she would know no more than the police, say, or than the reporters, or the people reading papers in the subway. She put out her hand to wake him, but before she touched his arm, her decision was made. He was a story, the biggest human story she had ever happened upon, and the door shutting behind him when he went would not be the end of it for her.

He opened his eyes, and the trusting expression he had had in sleep disappeared. He was immediately tense.

"Come and eat," she said.

When he had sat down at the table she made a pretense of going to find cigarettes and left him there while she went swiftly through the studio and into her bedroom, closing the doors of both rooms so her voice would not be heard.

For the second time that night she dialed a number and listened to the insistent ring at the other end. This time there was no waiting. A voice said, "Hello."

"Ralph? Were you asleep?"

"Nearest thing to it. I am looking over a copy of *Photonews*. What's this guy Trout trying to do—eliminate the language? There isn't enough writing in this magazine to use even basic English, and——"

"Listen, Ralph, something terrific has come up. That Lejeune suicide—well—there's more to it than meets the eye. Something really big, and I need your help."

"Talk louder, will you?"

"I can't. I'm not alone. Ralph, will you do me a great favor? I hate to ask you, but there's absolutely no one else——"

"Shoot, darling."

"Will you come over here immediately?"

"If you'd listened to me an hour ago, I'd be over there."

"No. I want you to trail someone for me. Wait down on the street near the door. You'll see a man leave. Medium height, tan raincoat. Hatbrim turned down all around. Don't let him out of your sight."

"Evie, I'm devoted to you, but this doesn't make sense. If you're suspicious of your men call Pinkerton's. They make a specialty of that."

"Please stop joking!" The vehemence in her own voice surprised Eve and she was conscious of how cottony dry her mouth was and with what pressure she was clutching the telephone. There was a pause at the other end and a sound as if Ralph had tossed the magazine from his lap and then he said soberly, "What's up?"

"I can't tell you now. All I can tell you is that this is desperately important to me. In the morning, when you can phone without losing the trail of this man, call me and I'll explain everything. It's the biggest break I've ever had and I'm begging you for help. Will you do it, Ralph?"

"I'll be over there in twenty minutes, but you'd better be lucid tomorrow morning. Awfully lucid."

"Thanks. Thanks."

She hung up and sat unmoving for a moment on the edge of the bed. She'd really plunged into something. The guilty thought caught her that she had no right to get Ralph involved. Trailing a man with a gun is not always a harmless diversion. But it was done now. She picked up a package of cigarettes and went back to the kitchen.

Her guest was bent over the food. He was swallowing in large gulps without tasting, as if the only necessity was to fill the emptiness within him. After a moment he looked up, apologetic.

"A thousand thanks," he said. "I shall not be so careless as to neglect to eat again. Once I knew very well that an army travels on its stomach. It seems also to be true of a soldier traveling alone."

"Then you are a soldier?" she asked.

"I was."

"What are you?" she asked lightly, concerned with clearing the dishes away, putting the question as if the answer didn't matter.

"I am a waiter—an oaf of a waiter who doesn't know enough to remove plates from the right." He smiled, recalling his colleague at the Athenian Room.

"Don't count on it," she said. "Not after the way you ran out an hour early. You're fired."

"If I had killed Lejeune, leaving early would have been a mistake, you think?" He took the napkin and wiped his lips. "Well then, you know one thing about me. I am not a student of the perfect crime."

"Yes, I know that. And I know you are not a waiter. That leaves me a wide variety of things to choose from."

"Perhaps it is best to say simply I am a Frenchman. Does that answer you"—he pushed his chair away from the table—"or doesn't it? No, I am afraid it does not. Today there are Frenchmen and Frenchmen."

"You are eliminating the 'and Frenchmen'?"

"Yes." His face hardened. He was once again the wary stranger who had walked into her apartment hardly an hour ago. He went into the other room and picked up his hat and coat from a chair by the door. Over the chair hung a row of large, clear photographs framed between double pieces of glass. He moved from one to the other, studying them intently.

"It is all here," he murmured. "This is war. This is just the way it is and you saw it!"

"I was in Africa for six weeks."

"And now you are in New York taking pictures of night-club entertainers."

"I have a job," she said. "Trout Publications gives me the assignments."

He was opening the door. "You have been very kind." He bowed stiffly. "All my thanks."

"I should like to help you."

His eyes swept over her again. "Help me? Yes, help me by not making this into an anecdote for Trout Publications."

She listened to the door click shut and his light footsteps going down the stairs. Then she ran to the window. He was walking rapidly up the street in the lightly falling snow, but before he was out of sight a figure emerged from a near-by doorway and hurried after him.

Where is he going, she wondered, and as the memory of his parting words flooded over her she whispered, "Damn him! Damn him!"

When she turned away from the window she was trembling.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALEXIS brushed the layer of snow off the park bench and sat down. Directly opposite him and across the street was the apartment building. According to his week-long observation he could expect a tall, blond man in a black hat and overcoat to come out of the door of that apartment at about ten o'clock in the morning. The man would be holding a brief case in one hand and a heavy cane in the other. Once on the sidewalk he would nod good-by to the doorman, turn up his collar, and start determinedly down the Avenue. He went to the Library every day and he walked the entire distance.

There was yet about ten minutes to wait. Alexis shivered as the wind swept through the wooden slats of the bench. A loaded bus rolled by, and he caught a glimpse of the occupants, their morning papers spread open before them. They're reading about it, he thought—centered on the front page with pictures. Then he thought about the one picture that would not be there and of the photographer standing in her studio in a green silk robe. The memory of her was as sharp in his throat as the taste of the brandy she had given him. What kind of woman was she, he asked himself, that offered him help and could not perceive he was beyond help? Oh, he knew what kind she was. Money, friends, an airplane ticket—he was hearing the words as she had pronounced them, as if they were miracles, as if they could fix anything in the world. Well now, she had found out differently. He had taught her something.

He tried to shut her face out of his mind. He watched the traffic on the street and the people hugging their coats as they passed him. Some of them stared at him oddly, as if it were queer to be lounging on a park bench in such weather. If it were, he was not the only queer one. A few yards away a large bareheaded man in a loose tweed coat was sitting on another bench. His hair stood up in a short, wiry pompadour, and though he kept his chin thrust down into his collar, it was obvious he needed a shave. There was a vague familiarity about him which Alexis could not trace.

Alexis turned away from him and gazed at the façade of the apartment house. In the windows of a corner room on the fourth floor the shades were still drawn. He thought, behind those shades . . .

Henri Charles Morin rolled over in his bed and moaned. He was in the midst of another nightmare. He knew what was happening yet he couldn't wake himself up and leave it. He lay as helpless under the torture as if he were bound, while in his dream the pages of the book whirled before him and the little breeze they made fanned his fevered face. Someone was holding the book, but he was never able to see more than the cuff of the suit over the wrist and the long, clean-nailed thumb releasing the pages. *Eugenics for the Master Race* by Henri Charles Morin was a thick volume, almost four hundred pages, but the thumb seemed to pass over their edges in an instant and then begin again and again.

This flipping of the book pages was accompanied by the reading of the letter. Always the same letter, of course, and always the same unknown quiet, accusing voice. Henri knew the words by heart—with each sentence the sweat would pour out of him, soaking his pajamas.

"Sir," the voice announced, and then came the faint crackle of the letter paper held in the unknown hand. "This is to inform you of a resolution passed at the last meeting of the International Anthropological Association in New York, January 10, 1942.

"Whereas *Henri Charles Morin has in his book* Eugenics for the Master Race *conscripted anthropology and distorted and misinterpreted its data to serve the cause of unscientific racialism rather than the cause of truth,*

"Be it resolved: *that the International Anthropological Association repudiates such racialism and hereby eliminates from its membership rolls the name of Henri Charles Morin. . . .*"

The whirling pages of the book and the voice reading—this was the nightmare he had had with increasing frequency since he escaped from France. There was a period when he had first come to New York and married Rosa Thaler that it had gone away—but now it was back. It was grinding him down, sending him into madness, and he could not stop it. He would go to bed with his mind on a subject as deliberately far removed from himself as possible, and always his thoughts, like trained pigeons, would overcome every obstacle and fly bleeding back.

He had thought that marrying Rosa might exorcise it. He had told her the same story he had been telling everyone else who would listen, but the difference was that she believed him. She had widened her eyes in a manner he found startlingly childlike in a widow of fifty and insisted that of course she believed him. Why else would he—an anthropologist of international standing—think up anything so ridiculous as that book? Why else except under the threat of torture and death, she had asked.

For his part, he had made it sound very convincing, describing in detail how, after the book was written, he had watched for his chance to escape—and finally made it across the Channel, lying cold and wet in the bottom of a leaky fishing boat. She took it for granted that his pursuers had been the Nazis and not, as was the case, his own countrymen.

Two weeks after they met he had proposed and been accepted. They had been to a lecture at Columbia and returned to her apartment. Even the soft lamplight in the room did not conceal the fact that she was an unattractive woman. She wore her hair in gray bangs, and her face rather resembled those of the North American Indians she had spent her life studying—swarthy and strong-featured. When she dressed for a formal evening she affected an Indian beaded thong tied straight across her forehead. Her legs were short and thick. No, he was not fooling himself with the idea that he could love her.

Probably she had understood that, too, but when her mind cast around for love's substitute she hit on the wrong one.

"We have so much in common," she said happily. "Our studies, our interests, our work——"

Also we have this soft-carpeted apartment, he was thinking, and the fine dinners and the fine beds, and the freedom from the terror of insecurity—and from the other terror. Certainly they were not going to follow him here. The thought of them in this ornate, solid room was ridiculous.

There was another desirable thing about Rosa. She was a member of the International Anthropological Association. She would write and tell them the story he had told her. She would demand that he be reinstated. She would support him while he did new research and wrote a new book—a great and truthful book. Thus he would atone for his sin.

"There won't be any awkwardness with—with your daughter?" he asked.

"Barbara?" Rosa laughed. "She'll be delighted. She's very romantic the way girls are at fifteen, and"—she looked at him with that incongruous, wide-eyed gaze again—"and at fifty."

The implication of her remark was clear to him. He kissed her.

After they were married he became quickly accustomed to comforts again, and in a while the nightmares returned. Rosa took these nocturnal sufferings of his in hand just as she did every other detail of his life—in fact she was proud of them. When she helped him strip off the pajamas soaked with perspiration and brought him the scalding black coffee to quiet his shivering, she felt as if she were doing her part, as if she were participating in the world's upheaval, as if all the horrors poor Henri had gone through were deliciously close.

Now, as he flung himself from one side of the bed to the other, his fingers clutching at the sheet, he was conscious that Rosa was getting out of her bed and reaching for her robe. His dream was taking a fresh twist this time. The book and the letter were in it, of course, but through the reading voice he kept hearing another—the voice of Louis Lejeune. The whispering plaintive song was repeated over and over:

Vous qui passer sans me voir
Sans même me dire bon soir . . .

How real it was. As if the singer were in the next room. In his dream Henri felt himself back at the Casino de Paris, long ago, in another life, in another world. He could see the thin-stemmed glasses of Romanée St. Vivant gleaming on the tables, and he recalled how it had seemed that evening that his own blood was as rich and ruby red as the wine, and was flowing through his veins with exuberance enough to burst them. That very day he had been awarded an Institute fellowship. He was to spend a year in Tahiti studying and gathering material for his first book. The girl he had chosen to celebrate with him was beautiful. She had a long, graceful neck with a black velvet ribbon around it, and milk-white shoulders. Everyone who passed their table stared at her. Someday they will be looking at me, too, he had assured himself. Henri Charles Morin, distinguished anthropologist, member of *L'Institut National d'Anthropologie*. Secure and confident he had been then, with the peak of his life still before him.

Louis Lejeune, a homely young man with a caressing voice, had been facing the future too. Who could have prophesied that their paths would cross and follow along with each other on the journey down—down from the top? To Henri, shabby and ambitious, the words of the song Lejeune sang that night did not mean a desolate youth pleading with a haughty beauty. It was himself addressing the passers-by at the Casino. . . .

He felt Rosa's arm beneath his head, and then he was sitting up, burning his lips on the coffee. The rest of the nightmare faded but the song went on like a phonograph record someone forgot to turn off. Am I indeed going mad? he thought. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and groaned.

"Henri, you are sick," Rosa announced. "I am not going to allow you to go to the Library today. You must stay home. You must stay in bed."

He shook his head.

"If you will stay home," he heard her say through the pleading tune of the song, "I will get your notes out of the brief case and type them for you myself."

He looked at her with horror. In her bright red robe she looked more like an old squaw than ever. "You promised I could help you," she went on. "You promised we were going to work on the book together." He pressed his hands to his ears to shut out the song. "You don't have to get out of your bed at all. I'll bring the brief case and typewriter in here."

"No!" he said. "NO!" His voice rose to a shout. "I forbid you to touch the brief case. I forbid you to lay a finger on the brief case!" He thrust her aside and got out of bed. "I am going to the Library as usual and don't try to stop me," he warned her.

"But you have been working too hard. You are sick."

The words of the song still came faintly into the room. "Yes, I am sick," he said bitterly.

He went into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. The skull, dolichocephalic, showed through the thinning blond hair. The eyes were blue, the nose straight, the nostrils leptorrhinian, beneath them the golden hairs of the mustache and slender-lipped mouth. Perfect Nordic, he thought to himself for the thousandth time, and for the thousandth time was filled with a mirthful agony at the joke of it. He frowned, and a deep wrinkle appeared between his eyes, in an even line with the cleft in his chin. Together they divided his face in half. He felt that given a tug it would split in two like a piece of ripe fruit. He had a sudden vision of the book, bound in gray and the square black letters across the jacket. *Eugenics for the Master Race.* That was a product of the ripe smashed rotten fruit pulp he had inside his head. His hands shook so much that he gave up the idea of shaving. He would dress and get away from the apartment and from Rosa as soon as possible. A brisk walk in the icy air down Fifth Avenue to the Library—that might clear his brain and drive the tune from his head.

Hastily he drew on his clothes. His overcoat and the locked brief case were in the front closet in the foyer. As he walked down the hall Lejeune's voice swelled louder in his ears. It seemed to come from beyond the door to his right, the door to Barbara's bedroom. He stopped before it in surprise and listened. Then he pushed it wide open. The first thing he saw was the phonograph on the desk and the turntable going around and around.

Vous qui passez sans me voir
Sans me donnez d'espoir—adieu—bon soir——

sang the record. Henri stood transfixed for a moment, conscious only of a warm surge of relief. Barbara was curled up in a big chintz-covered chair, her chin in her hand. He smiled at her. He was delighted with her. Wasn't it she who now released him from the fear of madness? For the first time he thought her plain little face, a smaller model of her mother's, was interesting. It occurred to him that he must do something nice for her.

Perhaps take her to lunch at one of the smart places, whatever they were, where young girls like to go. She was looking up at him, and he noticed her eyes were reddened and miserable.

"What's the matter with you, Barbara?" he asked. "Why do you play a sad record over and over and make yourself cry?"

"He's dead," she said. "He shot himself last night at the Athenian Room—before I ever had a chance to see him." Her voice became a wail.

"Who is dead?"

"Louis Lejeune."

"Lejeune! The singer? I didn't even know he was in America!"

"That's because you're always in the Library with your head stuck in a book." As she looked at him her eyes widened with interest. "Why, Henri, I had no idea it would affect you like this. Of course all the females in town are practically in sackcloth. Did you know him or something?"

"No. Yes, in a way. I—I'd heard him in Paris, of course." Henri tried to keep the agitation out of his voice. The automatic record player clicked and the low moan of the song began again. "You say he shot himself?"

Barbara waved morosely at the morning paper spread out on her bed. "There it is right on the front page. Gosh, what a story. He used a revolver with a jeweled monogram and they found a note somebody sent him accusing him of betraying a French patriot, and now the police want to question the French waiter who discovered the body and they can't find him. He gave a false address!"

The room reeled darkly in front of his eyes, and Henri grasped at the bedpost to steady himself. Then he picked up the paper and fled.

Lejeune's soft tenor whispered after him.

At the sight of the tall figure in the black overcoat coming through the door, Alexis felt the creeping numbness of the cold vanish from his limbs. He grew warm, almost feverishly warm, and as unnerved and fearful as he had been the night before. Morin was late this morning, nearly a half-hour late. Hurrying after him, Alexis passed the bareheaded man, standing up now, leaning against a bus-stop sign. Automatically, only half seeing him, Alexis noticed his highly colored skin. A drunk, he thought, an unwashed drunk with a fever.

Then he forgot everything as he kept his eyes on the figure ahead striding along in double time, jerkily swinging its cane like a man in an accelerated movie reel.

CHAPTER SIX

HENRI MORIN nodded his greeting to the library guard as he pushed through the wicket at the entrance.

The guard was a frail man with thin white hair and a thin studious face.

"Good morning, Dr. Morin," he said. "You're late this morning."

"Yes—yes." Morin made a vague gesture. "The weather, you know." Then he stopped and came back and faced the guard. "It is the first time in more than a year that I have been late, is it not?"

"Why yes," said the guard, nodding. "Yes, that's true."

Morin stared him hard in the eye. "Remember that, sir. Remember that. It may be important."

"All right."

"And another thing, sir. Watch out whom you let pass through that affair." He pointed to the wicket turning steadily as people entered the Library. "You may permit a killer to enter the building. You may aid an assassin. Something to contemplate, eh?"

Morin turned and strode off toward the elevator. The guard looked at the girl at the information desk and raised his eyebrows.

"He's tame," said the girl. "He's tame compared to some that I get."

Upstairs in the catalogue room Morin placed his brief case and cane on a table. He selected a drawer from the wall closest to him and bent over it. A quick inspection of the people in the room failed to confirm any of his suspicions. They were hunched in the customary attitudes, each over his own drawer, each going through the rows of white cards with slow, searching fingers. Across the table from Morin two Sisters held a consultation in whispers. At one side of him a barelegged girl in a fur coat scribbled in her notebook.

The room seemed, as usual, full of quiet activity. He began to copy down book titles, and on an ordinary morning he would have enjoyed this part of his routine. It made him feel full of purpose and ambition, especially when he happened across the listings of some of his own volumes. The old interests would take fire in him again, and the blood seemed to swell eagerly in his veins, readying him for work. But now his pen moved automatically, and he paid no attention to what he wrote. His eyes darted about the room, keeping a constant watch on the newcomers who entered.

Suddenly his fingers froze on his pen. A young man in an army uniform had taken the stool next to him. The young man held a crumpled blue handkerchief to his face with one hand and wrote on a paper with the other.

Why was he hiding his face like that? Morin asked himself. He thought, I can never be too cautious. I must spend the rest of my days being smarter and quicker than my pursuer. His eyes traveled over the soldier's loosened coat. It looked too large for him. It might not be his own uniform at all. How clever to contrive a disguise out of a uniform. How easily that might fool anyone else but himself. With care, making no obvious motion, Morin put down his pen and moved his hand onto his cane. His fingers closed around the familiar gnarled roundness of it. His eyes traveled to the back of the soldier's neck. It was bent away from his collar so that Morin could see the white skin and the faint clipped hairs growing upward. With the proper pressure and accuracy the cane could break such a neck. Morin felt elated with power and knowledge. He felt even a small surge of pity for this opponent who was to be so soon outwitted. He took hold of his cane. At that instant the soldier sneezed loudly and blew his nose with trumpeting thoroughness. Then he gathered his notes together and walked toward the desk in the center of the room.

Morin watched him with hypnotic fascination, his hand trembling so that the cane made a clicking noise against the hard wood of the table. The Sisters looked over at him, curious. He withdrew his hand hastily and pulled out his own handkerchief to wipe his moist face. The handkerchief smelled of some cologne Rosa had given him, and the odor called up the apartment, the bedroom in which he had been that morning so tortured, Rosa with her self-feeding concern for him, and the awful look of the newspaper on Barbara's bed. Could he ever bear to return there? And where else was he to go?

Automatically he took his several little slips of paper over to the central desk, received the green numbered card, and left the catalogues to go into the reading room. He scanned the people waiting on the bench for their books. They seemed completely unaware of him. He took a place between the soldier with the reassuring cold and a rosy-faced, gray-haired man in a formal-looking blue Chesterfield coat. The rosy-faced man was gazing constantly back and forth between the green card in his hand

and the numbers being flashed on the indicator before them.

"Pardon me, my friend," he said after a moment. "Could you tell me how long it takes to get one's books?"

"The time varies according to the location of the books on the shelves," Morin answered coldly.

"I am doing a bit of research," the man confided. "Some research for a movie scenario. Usually I spend my afternoons seeing movies, but I am devoting today to writing one. I have a number of ideas."

Morin kept his eye on the indicator and the entrance to the room and tried to look as aloof as possible.

"In my opinion," the man continued, "my ideas are as good as the ones they put on the screen. My occupation furnishes me plenty of material. I am a waiter, you see, at a highly fashionable supper club frequented by celebrities. Almost every evening has its drama."

The soldier blew his nose again, and the man's next words were drowned out.

"—only last night," he was saying. "Maybe you read about it in the paper. Of course I'll have to fill in details out of my imagination—but what else is an imagination for?"

He looked at the indicator and stood up. "One fifteen. That's my number. Good day to you." He bowed and walked with dignity to the book desk. Morin was glad to be rid of him and the distraction of his idle chatter.

Finally his own number was flashed. He took his books and, walking down the long, red-tiled aisle, chose a seat at a central table. He spread his things out under the green lampshade and studied the faces of his tablemates. Except for a shriveled little man working his lips laboriously as he read, the only others at the table were women. Morin felt relieved, almost lighthearted again. Maybe he was succumbing to nerves and fancies too much, he told himself. He looked through the high-arched window above him and saw the snowflakes whirling in the gray sky. It was the kind of day he liked the best. The melancholy aspect of the weather made the circle of lamplight on the library table so much more enclosing. There he was shut off from all the irritations of Rosa and his daily life, there he was alone, a stranger among strangers, and no one would pry into his secret.

The secret lay locked in the brief case. He opened the case with a small key and drew out the papers. The top one was covered with fine annotations. That was for the benefit of the glances of passers-by. He lifted the edge of this top paper. Underneath it the next sheet was pure, untouched, white. And so was the next and the next and the entire pile that were clipped together. In all the months he had come to the Library, in all the hours he had spent there, he had not written one sentence. The work he was supposedly doing grew and grew in his conversations with Rosa and her friends, but not one word of it was set down on paper.

He looked at the unused sheets almost gleefully, like a child peeping at a hoarded comic book behind a grammar. He was fooling them all, fooling Rosa, who thought she knew every breath he took; fooling those pompous busy men at the university with their rival theories and their jealousies. Although they treated him as a traitor and a charlatan, they waited in fear for the day he might publish something that would outshine and devastate them. And he kept them in this constant state of nervous anticipation while all the time there was nothing—nothing.

Smiling to himself, Morin opened a book and began to read. Now he hardly noticed the people walking past him up the aisle, their clothes rustling, once in a while the squeak of shoes, or the soft clop of rubbers. It was only when someone in a flapping unbuttoned coat brushed by so close that the white slips of paper on his table were blown fluttering to the floor, that Morin looked up and remembered where he was and who he was.

A page boy wheeling a cart of books stopped to help him retrieve the little papers. When they were all in a neat pile again and the boy had been thanked and had gone, Morin turned back to his book.

He never knew exactly what made him look over at the pile of slips. Was it, that without counting, there seemed to be one too many, that one seemed the wrong size? He pulled this odd one out from among the others and realized it had not been there before. It was not a catalogue blank at all but a piece of folded notepaper. He opened it. Inside there were four lines of writing.

The impact of the strong black tracks of the words was like the blow of a fist on his eyeball. He stood up and, abandoning his open brief case, his coat and cane, fled down the aisle. He sprinted back through the catalogue room past the amazed stares of its occupants and stopped breathless outside the door. His only desire was to get out, to get away from that building immediately.

He took the wide stairway to his right, catapulting himself down several steps and then clinging to the banister each time he shot one swift terror-stricken glance behind him. In this way, like a man being propelled from behind by a strong wind, he reached the ground floor and dashed across the lobby.

"You let him through! You let him through!" he screamed at the guard as he thrust the old man out of his way and pushed toward the heavy outer door. A blast of whirling snow enveloped him when he opened it, and he struggled half blinded down the slippery front steps and out onto the crowded sidewalk. Frantically he wove through the lunchtime crowds until he came to a newspaper stand at the corner. He clung to the green-painted wood of it for support and looked again behind him.

Later, at the inquest, a passer-by reported how the hatless and coatless Morin, snowflakes stuck in his hair like milkweeds, kept gesticulating with his arm, as if he thought he could push the curtain of white flakes aside and see something clear. When he turned an instant later and bolted out into the street directly in front of an oncoming bus, this same passer-by testified that Morin had been pursued by a man in a tan-colored trench coat. The reason the passer-by was so sure of the color and material of the coat was that he was able to produce a flap of cloth torn from its shoulder.

In his own words: "There must of been two fellows chasing after this guy. When I grabbed at this thin one in the trench coat, a great big one, unshaved like a bum, hits me. I go down like a ninepin. When some people picked me up, these fellows are gone." The witness also produced at the inquest a bruised chin and cheek.

Since the police had found a note written in French clutched in Morin's fist, they had another question.

"Could you say that either of the two men you describe was French?" the coroner asked.

"The big one swore at me," the witness replied ruefully. "He didn't learn them words anywhere but in Brooklyn."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALEXIS walked through the small, quiet lobby of the Hotel Larchmont and picked up a house phone from the stand in the corner.

"Will you give me Mrs. Whidden's room number please?" he asked the operator.

"That's 509. Mrs. Whidden is not in. She left a message here for a Mr. Trout."

"I'll take it," he said.

"Mrs. Whidden has gone to the hairdresser's, Plaza 5-4403, if you wish to telephone her. She will be in by five o'clock."

Alexis hung up. He reached for the telephone directory and turned to the *T*s. There were a dozen Trouts listed. It need not be that Trout, he thought, and yet considering the goal toward which his quarry would naturally move it was likely to be that Trout. What more obvious alighting place for her than in the powerful world of publishing, the world of money, friends, airplane tickets, and similar magic? It might be awkward if Trout should see him and remember him, he thought, but that was years ago and in another world. He recalled the editor's suave voice: "*Come to America. I could use a man like you.*" Well, he had come to America at last. But he had come for something quite different, not as a writer for *Photonews,* but as copy for it. How curious that this might be a thread leading back again to the girl with the camera. The thought skipped through his mind that Miss Stokes's attempt to get him out of the city might have some connection with her employer's friend. He dismissed the idea at once. How could she possibly have known Mrs. Whidden was on his list of three, when no one in the world knew save himself?

He chose a chair in the corner of the lobby, half obscured by a flourishing rubber plant, and sat down to wait. If she were alone when she came in he would follow her upstairs.

Long before she was due, Mr. Vincenti would begin to watch for her. The enormous plate-glass window of the shop hung with pink filmy material gave him a good view of the sidewalk up to Sixtieth Street. She lived on Sixtieth Street in the Hotel Larchmont, and every Thursday afternoon, a few minutes before four, she walked around the corner to Vincenti's, Inc., to have Mr. Vincenti do her hair.

He saw her coming now. Soft blond strands, the silken feel of which he knew so well, blew back below her fur cap and her fur coat was held tight around her. Her fragile brown shoes, no engulfing clumsiness of boots of course, stepped gingerly over last night's snow. He waited at the desk, pretending to consult the appointment book while she drew closer. She carried, as usual, the copy of *Photonews* under her arm. Later, while her hair was drying, she would read it. Mr. Vincenti was aware of her more-than-ordinary interest in *Photonews*. Indeed her name and Newton Trout's were coupled often in the papers for anyone to read. There had been a picture of Mrs. Whidden and the publisher with the sharp nose and old-man's sagging throat seated behind a chip-sized table in a supper club. Had Mr. Vincenti been a less confident man, the stature of his competition might have discouraged him. But Mr. Vincenti was young, and, in a miniature Valentino way, handsome. As he put it to himself, he had other things in his favor.

When she was almost to the door, he turned abruptly and walked away through the rosy mirrored shop. He would not see her again until she was in his booth, an oiled silk bib draped over her and her smooth hair dripping. He liked to come in after she was seated, so that he could avoid noticing he was shorter than she.

Each week their conversation was the same: he would discuss her hair; he would talk about the health and antics of his saddle horse, and then, as soon as he could manage it, he would be skirting the subject of sex. He knew just how much he could say, just how bantering the tone of his voice must be. He knew how often his fingers might flick the velvety softness of her ears and how to stand barely touching her knees when he set the front curls. For the last few months he had made love to her every Thursday for twenty minutes while he fixed her hair—and he still had nothing but his hope.

Today when she sat before him he combed out her hair carefully, raising his eyes now and then to examine her reflection in the mirror. She had the kind of face he appreciated—gray, slightly protuberant eyes with heavy lids, small arched nostrils, and a ripe, disdainful mouth. She was vain and he knew it. Satisfaction with herself was indicated in every languorous movement of her body. Mr. Vincenti's desire rose up almost unbearably in him. He would like to make her look hungry for something, he thought.

"Will we have it up at the sides again?" He lifted the wet locks from her ears and held them on top of her head.

"Up at the sides, if you say so."

"It worked out well last time?"

She smiled slyly, immersed in some memory. "You should have made me wear a sandwich board with your name on it," she said. "I was at the Athenian Room. When the ladies weren't swooning over Louis Lejeune, I think they were wondering where I have my hair done."

Mr. Vincenti's antiseptic little hands flitted about her head like two hummingbirds.

"It's just as well they do not know. They'd all be in here wanting me to make them look like you. I'll do your hair, I'd tell them. See God about your faces." He bent close to her ear and his voice softened. "God has been good to you, Mrs. Whidden."

"So have you," she said, "but you are more expensive."

Now she had spoiled his mood. He did not like to be reminded that it was all business between them—that she was paying him for services rendered. He was hair stylist to the most fashionable women in New York, and she spoke about prices as if he were a common barber. He did not need her money. His bank account would be one more surprise in store for her when the moment came. In cold silence he went on winding the strands of hair and setting them into place. But he could not afford to sulk too long.

"Do you got to the Athenian Room again tonight?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Why?"

"Your coiffure will have no competition now that Lejeune is not there."

"Has he gone?"

"He committed suicide last night. It was in all the papers."

He felt her head jerk beneath his fingers.

"I slept very late," she said, "and I've been busy all afternoon. I haven't even seen a paper."

"He's supposed to have done it because some Frenchman was after him. He was a collaborationist or whatever they call it—and they were going to kill him."

"But—but how does anyone know that is the reason he did it?" Her voice came harshly with effort. Her throat was suddenly parched.

"The police found a note in his pocket threatening him—it's printed in the papers—with a picture of a hundred women weeping on the sidewalk in front of his apartment."

Mr. Vincenti was about to slough off the subject entirely when he met her staring eyes in the mirror. Her cheeks seemed to have sunken while he talked, the silk bib spread over her rose and fell with her rapid breathing. He gaped at her. She looked like a runner at the end of a long race.

For her part, Charlotte Whidden stared back at him with almost as much surprise. So this is how it comes, she was thinking. She had dreamed about it many times, but not in her most tortured visions had she thought that the tidings of death would approach her in a perfumed shop, out of the mouth of this little man, this hairdresser.

It was over two years since that day in Paris when she had learned she was on the black list and her death sentence passed. Much had happened since then and many miles had been put between her and France. She had grown to think of it as a story, once told and then forgotten, as a gesture made in a moment of fury and then the fury evaporated and forgotten too. Even the picture of her they'd published at the time—an old photograph and she so much younger attired in the fashions of twenty years before, looking like another woman altogether—had helped the illusion of unreality. They can't mean me, she had thought, her hand going to her throat in terror. The warm pulse was beating so strongly there under her hand. Not me, she thought.

And that night at the dinner party for Commandant Ernst Koch one of the guests had brought her a drink and bowed low.

"I see we have both been honored, Madame Dupras," he whispered; "according to certain persons we are corpses playing hookey, eh?" She had recoiled with distaste at the phrase, and at his grinning pale face with its blond mustache. He was an anthropologist. In fact the dinner was partly to celebrate the publication of his book, *Eugenics for the Master Race*. He had clinked his glass against hers. "You are looking in radiant health," he said. "And I am sure you shall continue to do so."

Dupras had joined them in the toast, laughing. "So you, too, read illegal papers, monsieur!" He shook his head with mock severity. "It is forbidden. The next time I shall have you both arrested for it."

For months the memory of the crudely printed list and the picture had shattered her life—but nothing came of it, and her anxiety dissolved. Since she had come to America she had hardly even thought about it. America was too far away, too normal. Now, seeing the truth in the eyes of Mr. Vincenti, she gave one convulsive shudder, and the hairpins that had been laid on a towel on her shoulder slipped down and tinkled to the floor.

Mr. Vincenti winced with jealousy at her reaction to this Lejeune story. He clapped his hands, and a uniformed maid wheeled in a drier. Mr. Vincenti adjusted the hairnet.

"Forgive me if I gave you bad news, Mrs. Whidden."

"Why no," she said, "it's just that suicide——" She shook her head distastefully. "I can't understand it for any reason. No matter what happens it's better to be alive. I—I wonder if you have a newspaper, I'd like to——"

"Of course. I'll get one for you."

When he left the booth he was cheerful. So, he thought, this proved she was no different from those others weeping for the dead singer. She was, like the others, a woman, with the same vulnerability. He put his hand up and stroked the soft petals of the flower in his buttonhole. He need only have patience, he counseled himself, patience.

He found an afternoon newspaper that someone had brought in. The prominent place given to the Lejeune account in the morning was now shared by another story and photograph. "Second French Revenge Note Found," read the headline. "Henri Morin, French Scholar, Killed in Traffic Accident While Eluding Pursuer."

Charlotte sat in a little world of her own under the bright chromium helmet of the drier, the newspaper on her knees. All the story said and all it did not say was quite clear to her. She was safe until she stepped from the door of the shop. Once on the street she was in danger. She had to think of something—quickly.

The copy of *Photonews* lay on the table in front of her. Ordinarily she would begin to look at it now, starting on the first page, methodically, thoroughly, the way Newton liked her to do. When she saw him he would quiz her about it, ask her opinion, want her to comment on the most minute details of make-up and phrasing. If he mentioned something she did not recall, he was furious. She'd learned long ago how to please him, how to exhibit a shrewdness that matched his own, how to stick by her ideas and give him the good fights he enjoyed. She had mastered the technique of interesting and holding him. She was his companion and adviser. But she was not yet his wife.

If she were married to him, she thought, there would be many things to do. He would protect her for the sake of his own reputation and for the sake of the magazine that was his life. He had money and powerful friends. She could travel to some distant place, go to Mexico, even fly to South America until the note-passer was caught or grew tired of searching for her. As Mrs. Newton Trout she would have power again, and she would know how to use it.

In her fancy she saw herself after their wedding, telling Newton the whole story. She rather liked the picture of herself explaining to the great egotist that he had, for once, been roundly tricked. How would it sound to him to hear he was married to the former wife of Pierre Dupras, for that matter, to the actual brain and drive for which Dupras' body and name had served as a convenient shell? Above all else she knew that Trout was practical. He would not hold out his bare hand to stop a train, and by the same token he would not desert her. He had a logical mind, a mind used to "arrangements." He would have to protect her identity and in time he might even come to appreciate her talents and make use of them.

Although the heated air was blowing down on her face, Charlotte felt wonderfully cool and alert. She had no engagement with Newton for that evening unless he asked to see her when he phoned. It suited him to exhibit his independence of her, to make a date like a college boy each time he wanted to be with her. Even his telephone calls came at irregular hours of the day. He was an extremely busy man, but beyond that he played the game with her for whatever surprises it had in it.

She had recognized the technique and at first was pleased. It indicated that their relationship was one toward which he advanced warily, understanding its importance. Now she frowned, longing for time. A few weeks more and getting Newton to marry her would not be a gamble. But since when, like a fearful old lady, did she object to a gamble? She would ask him to meet her for lunch tomorrow and she would propose to him. The turn about in convention, the compliment, the proof of his attraction and her humbled pride would appeal to him.

When a uniformed girl came in to shut off the drier and take the pins out of her hair, Charlotte searched her face in the mirror. Her skin was flushed and her eyes were unusually bright. She had never been more attractive. It was there—even in the approval in the little maid's eyes. Everything would be all right. She had only to go to her apartment and stay safely in it until lunchtime tomorrow.

When Mr. Vincenti came in to comb her hair, her mind had turned to the immediate problem of getting home. Although it might be hysterical of her she could not, she simply could not walk down the street alone. Then a scheme took form. It was so obvious she wanted to roar with amusement. As Mr. Vincenti bent over her with his comb, she smelled the spice of the carnation in his lapel. A line read long before came back to her: "Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety."

"Mr. Vincenti," she said, bowing her head obediently under his hand, "if you have no more appointments after mine would you like to come over to my apartment for a cocktail? It's such a cold gray afternoon and I was thinking that——"

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALEXIS stiffened in his chair. She had come in. Her hair was sleek and shining beneath her fur hat. Beside her, chattering rapidly, was a short fellow in a greenish fitted coat, a dapper green hat slanting over his forehead. They passed Alexis on their way through the lobby.

"He weighs eleven hundred and fifty pounds," the short fellow was saying. "I give him a quart can of oats and almost a quart can of loose bran twice a day. The best oats money can buy . . ."

They were out of earshot, but Alexis could see the fellow's lips still spilling out his monologue. Who was that with her? How long would he stay upstairs? The two of them were standing now in front of the elevators. Mrs. Whidden looked past the head of her companion at the few people seated in the lobby. Alexis leaned closer to the arching leaves of the rubber plant but her eyes swept over him without interest. She opened her brown pouchy bag and he saw the gleam of metal as she drew out a cigarette case. Her companion's hand darted into his own pocket and with an elaborate flick of his wrist he held the blue flame of a lighter for her. In his eagerness he had jostled her, and the case fell from her hand onto the floor. As he bent to pick it up the lighter went out. He snapped at it again, but the spark didn't catch. His small, delicate-featured face turned crimson as he struggled with the stubborn bit of mechanism in his hand.

Just then the elevator doors clanked open and they entered with the cigarette still unlighted. Mrs. Whidden's face was a mask of suppressed amusement and disdain. Alexis did not know who the short fellow was, but he was, after all, a man, and thus deserving of commiseration, for he would be an evener match for the eleven-hundred-pound beast he had been speaking of than for the woman at his side.

When the indicator showed that the elevator had reached the fifth floor, Alexis realized he had been holding his breath, and as he relaxed a feeling of faintness like that of the night before swept over him. Here was yet another delay, another putting off of what must be done. The suspense was to be spun out again for a few more tortured hours. So far nothing had gone as he had planned it, and now not this either. He addressed himself in harsh silence: did you expect it to be like a shooting gallery where for a franc the target is set up for you? Late tonight is the logical time. She will be alone. There will be small likelihood of interruption. People in the hotel will be asleep. You will have a better chance to escape. The short sentences beat a staccato in his brain. A chance to escape, he repeated. And he had a vision of himself descending a stairway in the hotel, leaving a door unseen, disappearing into the covering night.

Instantly he was filled with bewilderment. Escape to where? And for what? In his vision he had seemed to have a direction. He was going someplace. What place? He had never before looked past the end of his self-set mission. He had been cunning because there was always a task ahead to be accomplished. But for after tonight he had no plans.

In the back of his brain he had not believed he would escape and he had not wanted to. But now did he want to? Guiltily, Alexis thrust the question away. *Please believe that I want to be your friend, the girl had said the night before, and the warm light of the fire had glowed along her cheek and found its reflection in her eyes.* But dead men need no friends.

Perspiration was trickling along his skin under his clothes as he buttoned his thin coat and stood up. He went toward the side door of the lobby, past the entrance to the cocktail room, the check room, and the telephone booths. Someone was emerging from one of the booths. Automatically he stepped aside. Then whoever it was changed his mind and the door was snapped shut again. Alexis glanced in as he went by. All he could see was the back of a man's head bent over the phone, and the hem of a brown tweed coat caught in the hinge of a door.

Alexis left the hotel and walked around the corner to the Avenue. It was almost dark, and the lights were on in the shop windows. He made himself walk slowly to use up time, stopping in front of each window to examine the displays. A milliner showed hats that looked like flowers and a florist featured flowers to be worn like hats. There were windows filled with an assortment of porcelains and silver candelabra and rows and rows of etchings and polished luggage. In one shop a ruby pin shaped like a ballet dancer twinkled alone on an expanse of white satin, and in the next six lobsters moved feebly on their bed of ice.

Often as a child Alexis had gone to big city fairs, and once he remembered there had been a ride, a very unusual ride which cost five francs. Those who paid sat in a miniature train and were drawn through a long tunnel. Occasionally, when there was a turn in the track, the train would pass a lighted panorama in a box—a castle perhaps, with a miniature king and queen or a brilliant garden filled with wax flowers, painstakingly modeled. The same sensations he had had then of wonder and surprise came back to Alexis as he moved dreamlike down the dark corridor of the street. Only a sea's breadth away there were guns and battles and here there was a fair and the sights were free.

Finally he came to a window hung with a filmy pink curtain. A golden statue about twelve inches high, a nude with arms flung upward, stood down close to the glass. Around the base of the statue were inscribed the words: First prize, Raymond Vincenti, International Hairdressers' Exhibition, New York, December 1942.

In December 1942, Alexis remembered, he had climbed for two hours up the mountain to the hideout. There had been thirty young men sitting in the hollowed-out room, thirty brothers-in-arms of the Secret Army of the Fighting French. Thin, tired, skins dark from dirt and exposure, they had turned their eyes toward him like defiant children until his guide, the postman of the village, explained who he was and what he wanted. He was seeking his son, the postman explained, a soldier who had not been heard from since the demobilization. It is Monsieur Le Capitaine's thought, the postman told them, that the boy may have been hurt, may have lost his memory.

The young men were shaggy as wild animals; their hair grew in long strands unevenly over their heads and in stubby, untrimmed beards on their cheeks and chins. Alexis searched each face, but Paul was not there. When he had finished and a decent time had elapsed, one of the young men approached him.

"We were wondering," he said, "if you have a scissors or a razor. We live in caves, we are hunted like beasts, but we could look like human beings, if it weren't for this"—he tweaked his face—"if we could cut our hair——"

Regretfully Alexis shook his head.

"Well then"—the young man shrugged and smiled—"the next new one that comes up. He may be a barber——"

Alexis took one more look at Mr. Vincenti's prize for barbering and walked on. He found himself face to face with a beautiful plastic lady in the next window. Her body was molded in lines long and haughty, and she regarded him from beneath languorous, half-closed eyelids fringed with curling black silk. She wore a yellow dress printed with black squares that looked like envelopes. All over her, cascading down her neckline, and draped about her hips, the lady wore a huge correspondence. There was a discreetly lettered card at her feet. It said, "For the wife who follows her serviceman to sunny climes."

There had been plenty of sun in Marseilles, Alexis recalled, but Mathilde had worn a black skirt and a sweater, green, with the initials H. B. on it in white, though those were not her initials. He knew about her clothes because he had begged the woman who had sat next to her at the theater to tell him how she looked that night when the police took her, what she said, what she wore. The woman had described it all to him patiently, over and over: a black skirt and a green sweater with the monogram H. B., and she had said nothing. Nothing. But why the strange letters on her sweater? he had asked finally when there was no other question left to ask. Le Croix Rouge the woman told him. They distributed clothing. One took what was offered. So that was how his wife had dressed to follow him to sunny climes. And there were no envelopes for him. If they permitted her to write a letter, he never got it.

With eyes burning and dry he searched the face of the model. He wanted to smash his fist through the glass at her. A wave of rage swept over him. He felt dizzy and had to lean his forehead against the cold glass. Then for the first time in many days he laughed. It is crazy, he whispered to himself. I waste hatred on a hollow doll when around the corner is a flesh-and-blood woman.

He left the dress shop and went on. It was very dark by now and the wind slashed at his ankles and the edges of his raincoat. He came to the double-storied window of an automat and peered in at the people eating. He remembered his meal of the night before, the soup steaming on the white table top and the stack of crusty toast, the block of cheese and the coffee, and he remembered the girl, her bright hair and the green silk robe that rustled softly when she walked. The sense of his own desperate aloneness poured over him. Often in the last few months he had had this feeling of walking about in the center of a gray nimbus that shut him in and shut the world out. He had moved from the lonely mud of a slit trench into the lonely orbit of a murderer. Not until the night before had he realized how much he yearned for some small sign of softness, of human communication.

He went into a restaurant and filled a tray, taking whatever was handed over the steam counter and not picked up by someone else. He stood holding the food indifferently, searching for a vacant place, when his eyes focused on someone across the room, and he hurried through the crowd toward a man who sat alone at a table for two. Alexis put his tray in front of the opposite chair and sat down. The visible part of the man's forehead was still wind-whipped from the outdoors. He had before him a glass of milk and a piece of chocolate cake and he seemed completely absorbed in pushing his fork through the fudge of the frosting.

On the condiment stand in the center of the table was a single daffodil in a bud vase. Alexis pushed it to one side so that his view was unobstructed. He said, "They are advancing the season with this flower, are they not?"

The man shoved a large piece of cake into his mouth and did not answer.

"It is not the best weather for such a long stroll down the Avenue, is it?" Alexis went on. "Nor for sitting on park benches." He reached across the table for the salt and his voice hardened. "Why do you follow me?"

The man washed down the cake with a long drink of milk. He looked up for the first time and shook his head irritably.

"I wish to hell I knew."

"You saved me from the crowd in front of the Library this noon, so I know you are not of the police."

"You're right. I'm of the age of chivalry. I'm following you because it is the whim of a lady that I do so. But the whimsy is lasting too long."

"Who is the lady?"

"Eve Stokes, the photographer you visited last night."

"Ah." Alexis nodded with relief. "I remember now. You were with her in the Athenian Room."

The man carefully corraled every cake crumb on his plate.

"She thinks you're going to make a big story. Are you?"

"I don't know. It is not my purpose to titillate the readers of periodicals."

"But your purpose is revenge, isn't it? The readers just love crimes of revenge. I'll be back in a minute."

Alexis watched as the man, broad and tall, in his loose coat, went over to a glass box in the wall, deposited two nickels, and came back with another chunk of chocolate cake.

The fork became busy again. "Listen," said the man, "I think it's a lousy idea. If it got you what you wanted"—he raised his wiry eyebrows and his quick eyes met Alexis'—"but it doesn't. I've talked with authorities on the subject. To a man they admit it's a flop." The cake bulged in his cheek for a moment. "You're tossing your weight around where it does no good. That's plain wasteful."

Alexis smiled. "I did not ask for your opinion, monsieur, and I don't intend to justify my plans to you nor to anyone. Nor to continue this conversation."

"Okay, okay. That's the right answer. But I promised Eve I'd try." He pushed back from the table and regarded his empty plate. "Funny," he said, "I used to dream of chocolate cake when I was where I couldn't get it. This doesn't taste as good as the dream. But I think I'll have another to make sure."

He got the third portion and came back with it.

"You think I'm a gourmand, don't you?" he asked cheerfully.

"And you think I'm a fool."

"Listen, Mr. Durand, or whatever your name is"—the large man put his fork down so that it clattered on the dish to punctuate his words—"I've read the newspapers. I've read the note you leave on these—these selectees. You're a Frenchman. You're needed where the killing adds up to something more than to satisfy your private vendetta. It's a matter of putting first things first. You're worse than a fool. You're a defeatist."

Alexis knew that his face was quite pale as he leaned across the table. "Who are you?" he asked, and his voice shook as he tried to keep the rage out of it. "Who are you that you can dispense wisdom in such a manner about that of which you know nothing?"

The large man wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, then tossed it, crumpled, onto his plate. "I'm nobody," he said; "but my friends are men who'd count, believe me, even with you. I'm plagiarizing them, that's all."

Alexis made a gesture of impatience. "I must ask you to inform Miss Stokes that this is one 'big story' she will have to pass up."

The man began to fold his scarf across his chest and hunch into his coat. "You must not misjudge Eve," he said. "I have the impression that the story was purely secondary. She's more of a human being than she is a reporter. Didn't you feel that?" He pushed his chair back from the table and pulled a wrist watch out of his pocket. The leather band flopped loosely in his fingers. "Eight o'clock," he said. "She's working tonight. She's taking pictures at that canteen for French sailors downtown. In the morning I'll call her and tell her that you prefer that she mind her own damn business. Good night and good luck." He was gone, his wide shoulders swinging through the revolving door and out into the street.

Automatically Alexis finished his meal. It was eight o'clock and there were several long hours ahead before he could return to the Larchmont Hotel. Fighting his newborn idea, insisting to himself that it was curiosity and nothing more, he walked to the phone booth and consulted a directory. It was listed under "French Seamen's

Café" and it was on Twenty-eighth Street. He shut the book with its bland offer of the address and thrust it back on its shelf. Once outside the restaurant he stood irresolute in the biting cold. Then, like a tired swimmer floating with the current, he joined the throngs on the sidewalk that were headed downtown.

From a doorway close by the large man watched and swore with relief. When he could no longer see Alexis, he turned and trudged rapidly in the other direction toward the Larchmont Hotel.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SITTING ROOM was not very large and was cluttered with too many things besides the usual hotel furniture: lamps, ash trays, untidy piles of newspapers, and several pieces of luggage stacked in one corner. The trinkets lying about, the candy dish, matchboxes, a glass donkey holding pencils on the desk looked temporary and inexpensive. A cocktail shaker and two glasses stood on a coffee table beside an ash tray filled with olive pits and cigarette butts. So she finally got her cigarette lighted, Ralph thought, recalling the little scene that he, as well as Alexis, had witnessed in the lobby.

He walked into the adjoining bedroom. Her fur hat was flung on the bedspread and a pair of brown suède sandals, still damp from snow, lay on the floor. On the dresser there were a dozen fancy perfume bottles and a photograph in a lucite frame. It was a three-quarter-length shot of a man whom Ralph recognized as Newton Trout. The pose was dramatic: Trout standing with his chin thrust forward and his arms crossed challengingly over his chest. His abundant gray hair waved back from his jutting forehead and nose. The photographer had taken all the lines out of his face. He looked less shrewd and witty than in real life, and younger. Ralph examined the photograph for a moment, wondering what there was between Charlotte Whidden and the publisher, a man known for his cunning and caution, a man not to be led unwarily into a lady's life. A light dusting of powder on the dresser indicated that Mrs. Whidden had paused there to fix her face before she went out. He speculated briefly about the identity of the little man who had trotted beside her.

He began his search with the dresser. Besides the gloves and lingerie there was nothing of interest until he came to the bottom drawer. In it, along with several handbags, was a green leather jewel case, unlocked. He understood why when he opened it, for on the velvet-lined tray there lay at first glance nothing of value—costume jewelry, junk, a broken string of coral. Something small and silver caught his eye and he drew it out. It was a pin. Three letters, C W D, were worked into a skillful entwining monogram. Ralph took it to the lamplight and turned it over. On the other side, beneath the sterling mark, was the familiar hooked J— the signature of the Parisian silversmith, Jauvais. In the quiet room Ralph could hear his own rapid breathing. This was a sign, he thought, a good sign. The woman had no doubt been in Paris. She knew of Jauvais, or at least his work. He turned the pin over in his hand and thought of the man whose sensitive, nimble fingers had made it and of the vigorous brain which had guided them, now moldering in a cemetery in Algiers. CWD. What did the D stand for? He must find out more about Charlotte Whidden. He opened the handbags, but they were empty. The brown pouch she had carried before was missing. She must have it with her now, and the cigarette case in it.

He went through the chest of drawers hurriedly. They contained clothing. Mrs. Whidden was a woman of luxurious tastes—the silk nightgowns were finely sewn, and they, like the lacy slips, were decorated with an embroidered monogram: CWD. Suddenly Ralph recalled something and went back to the drawer which held the handbags. One of them bore little tears that had no significance for him before. Now he could see they were the marks left by the removal of a metal initial. The shining C and W were still there. The D had been taken off. Evidently Mrs. Whidden tolerated this mysterious third initial only on her more intimate garments.

Ralph crossed to the desk in the other room. A telephone stood on the blotter and beside it a memorandum pad. Across the white paper was a single notation—lunch twelve-thirty, St. Martin Hotel. As he was opening the top drawer there was a sound of footsteps in the hall and a girl's humming. Then the clatter of a key in the lock of the bedroom door. With a swift movement he snapped off the desk lamp and crouched down in the darkness. Someone entered the bedroom and switched on the overhead light. It was the night maid, a thin colored girl in a gray starched uniform. Ralph watched her fold the bedspread and turn down the blankets. Then she went to the closet, took out a blue nightgown, folded it and laid it on the bed. She moved around the room for a minute until she came to the dresser. She paused, lifted a cut-glass atomizer from the cluster of bottles and, throwing her head back dreamily, pressed the bulb. When she left the odor of the perfume filled the room.

"Exquisite," murmured Mr. Vincenti. He was being tortured. He was going through the agonies of a man on the rack and still he was able to adjust his voice to the dulcet tones of the compliment. "Exquisite perfume," he murmured again as he led his partner through the dance in time to the violin music. He had not, of course, suggested that they dance. She had. She had put it so that he could not avoid it, and here they were gliding about the floor, pressed close together, his eyes about even with her shoulder and his nostrils close to the collar under which she had dabbed the perfume. He cursed himself for bringing her to a place where there was music, and yet dinner and gypsy violins and wine had been part of his plan.

The scent she used was the kind described by the ad writers as "haunting," "daring," rich with "masked potency." Yes, it was that all right and more, and he wanted her very much, not for love, but for the same reason he had wanted to own a horse, for example. The great creature, the mare with all her high spirits and her strength, was as obedient as a fluttering bird under the pressure of his hands, the gentle pressure of his heels. When he sat astride her no man in the world could look down on him. A magical feeling of lightheartedness pervaded him then the lifting of some obscure weight, of—yes, he thought, of actual happiness.

He felt Mrs. Whidden's body moving close to him. She danced, as she did everything else, with a not-quite-complete surrender, with a reserve of independence. His anticipation increased. Ah, his mare had been wicked, too, when he bought her. She had played up and she had run away, but he had won her fairly and without violence. He had never let her unnerve him, and his touch upon her had been deliberate and calm. He prayed now for the violins to stop whimpering, for the musicians to lay down their bows, for himself and this woman to be back at the table once more, and her eyes level with his over the red-checked tablecloth. . . .

The contents of the desk proved as unsatisfactory as those of the bedroom drawers. Ralph examined the few papers in it thoroughly, but Mrs. Whidden seemed to have had no existence prior to July 1943. That postmark was on the envelope of a note to "Darling Charl" from "Devotedly Genie." It invited Mrs. Whidden to a dinner party at Indian Point, Connecticut. The note joshed, "He has accepted, and he says he's looking forward to meeting you —so the rest is up to you. And you'd better take a good look at a copy of *Photonews*—that magazine is positively his only passion. Will you achieve what so many have failed to do—a change in the *status quo,* darling? We shall see." So that had been the beginning with Newton Trout, thought Ralph. The photograph in the other room was mute evidence that the meeting had been successful, that there had been many meetings since. In the desk, too, was an address book filled with the names and numbers of milliners and furriers, hairdressers and so forth. Several cards which might have come with gifts or flowers, and which bore a cryptic scrawl that looked like the name "Newton" were in one of the pigeonholes. The fellow seemed to be the soul of caution. But the meaning of the initial letter D remained elusive. The contents of the desk yielded not the slightest clue.

The next thing to try was the luggage. It was leather, plastered with dozens of torn foreign stickers, and it was locked. Ralph attempted to force the smallest piece but without success. He hesitated for a moment and then plunged his pocketknife blade into the leather and ripped an opening wide enough for his hand. He groped in the empty case for the side pockets and was rewarded by the feel of a stiff paper envelope. It contained an American passport for Mrs. Charlotte Whidden, an American citizen whose residence was in Paris. It gave her a visa to Algiers, to Lisbon several months later, and then to New

York. The envelope also contained a letter written in French. Ralph translated it quickly:

My dear Charlotte,

I am writing to you in care of Eugenia as you said. Let me know immediately that you have received this letter and what your address is. Write to me at the old place. It will reach me.

Have you been enjoying the little gift I gave you before you left? I trust it is with you constantly. Perhaps you consider it a trifle—I warn you that is a grave mistake.

A friend of mine is leaving here for Mexico soon, and from there will go to New York to see you about it. I will let you know how to make sure it is the correct person.

I could not find out much about D for you. They tell me that toward the end he was constantly under the care of a physician—a psychiatrist in fact. This will surprise you as much as it did me, since we know one cannot have a brain sickness without first possessing a brain, eh?

Remember the handsome singer you admired in the Café Marie? I am sorry to say he was as reckless as he was handsome.

I kiss you good night, and I caution you again to guard my gift. It holds our destinies.

F.

There was the D at last, and whoever he had been he was dead. But his identity no longer mattered to Ralph. It was the double talk in the second paragraph about the "little gift," the "trifle" that made his heart beat hammerlike in his temples and filled him with excitement. It referred, of course, to the cigarette case. He was sure of it. He examined the flimsy tissue-paper envelope the letter had come in. The date on the postmark was blurred, but the "Algiers" was clear enough and the censor's stamp across the front of it. F had taken good care to give no information to the casual reader, and yet to anyone who had the key the words were bursting with significance. Ralph couldn't help smiling to himself at the indication that the assassins hadn't realized the value of the cigarette case until it was transported thousands of miles away by the woman of one of them. The very thought of their desolation and dismay when they discovered this cheered him as nothing had for a long time. He could scarcely believe his incredible good fortune—to have stumbled upon the very thing that gave his life its whole meaning for now!

When he recalled all the events that had to fall into sequence before he came to stand in the lobby of this hotel a few hours ago and get an accidental glimpse of a silver cigarette case, he felt panic-stricken. What if Lejeune had not killed himself? What if Eve had not taken the picture of the waiter bending over Lejeune's body? What if the waiter had not come to see her, and she had not called him to follow the waiter, and what if he had even refused to do it or had quit as he wanted to do so often during the aimless frozen hours of that first night? And what if Mrs. Whidden had not felt the urge to smoke a cigarette until she was behind the frosted glass doors of the elevator? What if? In twenty-four hours he would have flown across the Atlantic farther and farther away from the one thing he sought, losing it forever.

He read the letter again. Could he be mistaken? How could he be? It was all there plain to him as the light blue ink markings on the white paper. His eyes wandered back to another line. "A friend of mine is leaving here for Mexico soon . . ." Naturally! They were trying to get the case back somehow through some emissary. Without the case they could do nothing—their murders and their betrayals were all in vain. Ralph gasped as the face of Mrs. Whidden's escort of the evening flashed before him. Could he be the "friend"? Was he even now giving her the correct sign that proclaimed who he was and taking the case from her? Was it, after all, too late?

Ralph turned the larger envelope upside down and emptied it. A small square picture fell out and nothing more. The picture had been clipped from a newspaper and in reproduction looked fuzzy and dark, but the features were unmistakable. It was a portrait of Mrs. Whidden, younger and in a hat and coat of the 1920s fashion. From under the helmet-like brim, turned up at one side, her face looked out haughty and self-conscious. Beneath her open coat showed the deep V of her neckline and one beautifully shaped hand touching the brooch that was pinned there. Below the photograph in small letters was the name "Braunwitz." Whatever story or notations had been printed with the picture were sheared away.

Ralph dug around in the suitcase again but could find nothing else. Perhaps the letter describing the emissary and his signal had not yet come. Perhaps the dark man of tonight had no connection with any of it. Ralph slipped the picture into his pocket, replaced the passport and the letter, and turned the luggage around so that the knife slit didn't show.

He stretched out on the couch and began his wait for the return of Mrs. Whidden.

CHAPTER TEN

THEY DROVE BACK to the hotel in Mr. Vincenti's long, shining black car. Once, when they stopped for a red light, he put his arms around Charlotte and kissed her. Afterward she relaxed against the back of the shadowy seat and smiled. In spite of the upsetting events of the day she felt fine. She had been drifting for so many months, and now suddenly she had a plan, an immediate plan which must be mapped and put into action. Now she must call into use all her talents and experience and go out to meet the challenge. It was a feeling, she thought, like that of a retired general hearing the drums of war. Yes, she felt fine, and, for the moment, tolerant. She studied the fastidious profile of the man beside her as he maneuvered the car along a slippery street. It had been a long time since she had spent an evening with such an uncomplicated fellow. *Petit étalon* she called him to herself. He was really very masterful in spite of his absurd size, for which an eleven-hundred-pound horse and a Cadillac were evidently not sufficient compensation.

Besides, she found him amusing. It would be amusing to watch what he did when they returned to her apartment. She hadn't any plan about him. She would follow the mood that seized her. She adjusted the deep-piled fur rug he had laid over her knees. Life, because it was threatened, was becoming entertaining again. He was telling her of the vacation trip he planned to take to Mexico City in January—ah, but that is a city! His voice took on a tremor of excitement. It has everything, color and culture, beauty and wickedness. A city of fascinating contrasts. The Paris of America.

He went on with his travelogue, but she understood what he was saying. Mexico is not a place to visit alone. One must have someone to turn to, to exclaim to, to make love to in Mexico City. That was what he was telling her.

Charlotte turned the key in the lock of Room 509 and walked in ahead to light a lamp. When Ralph Morley's bulk rose from the couch to confront her she gasped and, seeing him, Mr. Vincenti instinctively stepped back to look at the number on the door to make sure they had come to the right apartment.

Charlotte was staring at the man. The first thing that flashed into her mind was that this could not be the missing French waiter, Alexis Durand, whose description she had so painstakingly studied in the newspapers. Her heart began to beat again. This creature was probably no more than a regulation hotel prowler, she thought. She had run into his kind before.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing in here?"

"If you'll close the door," the man answered in an intense low voice, "I'll be delighted to explain."

"Get out of here! Get out of here at once—or you can explain to the police!"

"I'm afraid not. Not until you've obliged me by——"

The man walked toward the door, evidently intending to close it himself. He looked like a tramp. Mr. Vincenti could see the dark, unshaved face and the broad expanse of chest, but he hesitated no longer. He approached and, as a gentleman might help a lady up a curb, grasped the intruder's elbow and tried to lead him from the room. The stranger hit out with his right fist and Mr. Vincenti ducked. He swung his compact muscular back around into the big fellow's abdomen and pleasurably felt the soft, unwieldy flesh retreat. Then, using his grip on the big fellow's arm as a lever, he straightened up and tossed the whole two hundred pounds of him out into the hall. There was a heavy thump as the catapulting body met the floor, a grunt, and then silence. Mr. Vincenti stepped to the couch and picked up the coat lying on it. He tossed that out in the hall, too, and slammed the door. He turned around to face Charlotte's wide, astonished eyes.

"Judo," he said quietly. "I am a student of the art, but I've never had the occasion to use it outside of a gymnasium before. See if anything is missing."

Charlotte went into the bedroom. She knelt down and drew the green leather jewel case out of her drawer.

"Nothing is gone," she said, glancing hastily into it. "Nothing." She closed the case. She didn't want him to see the valueless trinkets that lay in it. The display of her poverty would mean one defense less against him. She remembered the swelling tendons in his neck as he had lifted the heavy body of the prowler, and in a strange, exciting way she was afraid.

"He must have been waiting for me to return, to get what I have on me," she said, and then in a tone almost pleading, as if she anticipated a refusal, "We had better call the police."

She was right. He did refuse. "I don't think it's necessary," he told her, not wanting to share his accomplishment nor interrupt his plan for the evening. "When that gentleman picks himself up he will find he is out of commission for several hours, and since there is nothing gone—let's forget him."

Mr. Vincenti's pulse was pounding in his throat. He felt huge with success. When he grasped Charlotte by the shoulders and kissed her he was not even conscious that he had to rise ever so slightly on his toes.

The telephone rang and rang.

Once in Africa, out of thirst, boredom, and a taste for experiment, Ralph Morley, Worldspan Press Association correspondent, had drunk an uncounted number of bottles of Algerian wine. The results had been too agonizing to bear repetition under any circumstances. So now when he raised himself to a sitting position in the fifth-floor corridor of the Larchmont Hotel, his first dazed reaction was to wonder what had compelled him to make such an appalling mistake again. This time, however, there were, besides his ringing head, some odd additional signs of discomfort. His neck was stiff and pain gnawed at the small of his back. Remembering, he groaned and glanced up at the door and its bare announcement: 509.

Elevator doors clinked around the corner, and there were muffled footsteps on the rug as someone approached. He saw first two long legs in army gabardine, and a soft Southern voice that seemed to come from somewhere near the ceiling said,

"I beg your pardon, sir, but is this your coat?"

Without moving his head Ralph rolled his eyes in the direction of the pointing brown shoe. The garment huddling against a door across the hall was his. From its dejected look it had received the same treatment as its owner.

"Yeah," he said weakly, "that's mine."

The legs jackknifed, and a pleasant young face topped by a garrison cap came down within the radius of his vision.

"If you don't mind, I'll move it over here, sir." The young man placed the coat neatly on the floor beside Ralph. "I don't want to step on it. That's my room door."

Ralph ran his hands briskly over his face, trying to rub away his dizziness. He glanced at the twin silver bars on the garrison cap.

"Say, Captain," he said, "how about a little Southern hospitality? Could I come into your room and lie down for a few minutes? I feel terrible."

"Certainly, sir. I understand perfectly. Can't say's I blame you either with what these Yankees pass off for whisky hereabouts——" He paused. "Why, man," he exclaimed, "you're bleedin'!"

Ralph followed the direction of his eyes toward the spreading stain on his trousers. It was blood all right, coming from his upper thigh. He swore eloquently and pulled his shattered wrist watch out of his pocket.

"Man"—the captain's eyes shone—"I ain't heard swearin' like that since I left my outfit. Makes me almighty anxious to get back. I'm gettin' right bored with this little ole leave." He put his hands under Ralph's arms and helped him up.

Ralph lay on the big comfortable double bed in 508 holding a towel to his nicked thigh and smoking a cigarette. He knew now that the captain's name was Daniel S. Hammett III, that he was twenty-three years old, and that he had served for two years with the American Army around and about in the Pacific. He also knew that next to shootin' possum in his native Carolina the captain sure did admire to shoot Japs. Before the war he had had good training for combat which accounted, he said, for his rapid rise from private to commissioned officer. Before the war he had been on a one-man campaign to invade Broadway. He had fought the battle of the producer's waiting room, and he had even established a beachhead in one.

"They kep' on tellin' me," he said, "I'd have to get rid of my accent. Man, I worked eight hours a day with an elocution teacher tryin' to get rid of it. One day they called me in to read for them. The part was a juvenile—depraved younger son of a fine ole Virginie family. When I got done they said I could have it if I worked hard to improve my Southern accent!" The captain laughed. "I went back to that teacher and learned my accent all over again—then the show closed after six performances and there I was."

He was sitting in a ludicrous pink-covered slipper chair with his long legs stretched out before him, and he chattered on without a letup. Ralph was glad to lie quietly on the bed, half listening, figuring desperately what his next move must be. Just across the hall lay Mrs. Whidden's brown pouch bag. On the dresser? On the desk? He had to get that cigarette case within thirty-six hours, before he went to the airport. He closed his eyes and imagined he was already in the plane, that around him was the humming of the great motors and below the stretch of the sea, and safe in his pocket, its hard shape against his chest, was the little silver box. To the outward eye it was no more than a gadget to carry the white cylinders of tobacco; but to himself and to the brave and desperate men he'd be taking it to it was hope and life. Bad enough if the fortune was lost forever, but how much worse to have it fall into the hands of the enemy, the contemptible gangsters who considered it their personal loot.

Yes, he was going to get the case, of that he had no doubt, but the problem was complicated. Complicated, for example, by the rough little beast he'd collided with tonight. A bodyguard? And by the Frenchman, Alexis Durand, whose revenge obsession might ruin everything. Once Mrs. Whidden lay dead and once the police were interested in how come, it would be impossible to get near the cigarette case for endless weeks of investigation and official red tape. His entire body tightened with rage as he thought of her just a few feet and the thickness of two walls away from him.

Take it easy, pal, he said to himself, don't rush it. He lifted the towel from his thigh and scowled at the clotted streaks of blood crisscrossing the skin. Damn wrist watch, he thought. After this he'd give up his eccentricity and wear it on his wrist where it belonged. Or leave it home. Just because it had been a gift of sentiment he didn't have to carry it with him. That was sheer superstition, and superstitions were self-indulgent, and besides the watch hadn't brought him any luck tonight, had it? He sat up in the bed, and twin hammers of pain struck at his forehead and his back. Quickly he lay down again. It's quits for now, he cautioned himself, you need a bath and a shave and some sleep. You got important work tomorrow.

The captain's voice cut across his consciousness. "That's what I like about the theater," he was saying. "It's screwy." He stood up and walked to the dresser, searching for a match. Ralph's wrist watch with the broken crystal lay on it. "People in the theater do screwy things," he said, "like wearing a wrist watch in a pants pocket. Say, you're not in the theater, are you?" He turned the watch over and bent closer to read the engraving on its back: *For Ralph Morley. Happy Landings from the Gang at Worldspan.* He rushed to the bedside.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, Mr. Morley, I sure am proud to make your acquaintance, sir. Man, I've read every little ole article of yours I could get my hands on. All the boys think you're great." Ralph's limp hand was pumped until he winced. But he was getting the glimmer of an idea. He was thinking out a plan. It was a fantastic gamble, but it was worth a try. If the boy was actor enough it might even work. And he wouldn't have to tell him very much. He'd make it seem like kind of a gag.

"Captain Hammett," he began, gazing up at the young soldier's flushed face, "what would you rather do more than anything in the world?"

The answer was prompt. "Act, sir."

"I thought so. Now listen——"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A LIGHT from behind the frosted glass silhouetted the black letters "French Seamen's Café" painted across the door and fell in a yellow streak over the walk. Alexis stood hesitating in the shadows. He had, during recent months, followed only charted roads, each calculated and unswerving, the ends of them known to him. They led to Lejeune and Morin and Charlotte Dupras. At the ends of them lay death. But what of this yellow path lying across the snow? If he took it and opened the door and went in, what then? An image of the girl's face came to him and he shivered. It had been so long since the desire for a face or a touch had taken hold of him that he didn't recognize it now, but thought of the weather and drew his coat tighter.

Two sailors, their heads hunched down in their jacket collars, their red pompons wobbling, opened the door and ran upstairs. In the brief interval before it closed Alexis heard a piano and laughter and the quick pounding of dancers' feet. The sound seemed to have a physical warmth that drew him toward it in spite of the rebellion in his brain. He went up the stairs to the entrance of the café. In front of it was a table bearing a cash box and a reel of pasteboard tickets. A pretty young girl sat behind the table sipping a bottle of pop. When she saw him she put the bottle down and said, "May I help you? Are you looking for someone?"

He stared at the lipstick-stained straws and the girl's full white neck and he felt like a ghost begging admission back into the world of the living. He was conscious of his shabbiness and the hollows in his face and the general grayness that enveloped him.

"Yes," he said, "yes. I'd like to come in—for a while."

The girl said, "I'm very sorry, but——"

She was going to turn him away. There was no place for him inside. Listen to me, he wanted to say to her, I am not dead yet. The song, the voice across the table, yes, even the tingling cherry drink in the bottle, I need them as much as anybody.

"I'm sorry," the girl was saying, "but the café is run only for men in uniform. That's a rule. I'm very sorry."

He clutched at the battered brim of his hat. "But I must see Miss Stokes," he insisted, making the unaccustomed effort of a smile. "Miss Eve Stokes, the photographer. I—I am French and I am her interpreter. Yes, that's it. I have to be with her during the picture-taking to—to explain things, you understand."

The girl's face was puzzled. "In that case," she said, "then it's all right. I'll take you to her."

She led the way through the checkroom and the gaily painted bar to a larger room where the dancers were. The pianist was playing something slow and sweet now and the floor was filled with gliding couples. Eve stood near the door in rapid conversation with a sailor and a blonde girl in a khaki uniform. Alexis could hear her words above the music and they were in French.

"Miss Stokes"—Alexis' guide plucked at Eve's jacket—"here is a gentleman asking for you. He says he is your interpreter."

Alexis saw Eve's head leaned against the doorframe and her fine hair slipping back away from her face. He saw the eager piquant face, too, and the brief arrested motion of her mouth as she looked at him.

"Yes, Miss Lucas," she said in English. "I've been expecting him. Thank you for bringing him in."

"Interpreter!" exclaimed the girl in khaki. "You speak perfect French."

"I speak it," said Eve. Her eyes were on Alexis, and he knew now what lay at the end of the path of light across the snow that had lured him here. It was an emotion he thought vanished with a woman in a green sweater and a black skirt.

"I speak it," Eve repeated, "but there is a great deal of it that I do not understand Monsieur . . . Monsieur . . . ?"

"Beaumont," said Alexis.

"Monsieur Beaumont will explain things to me. This is Sergeant McKenny," she said, looking away from him then for the first time "and Pierre Fogel."

Alexis grasped their hands eagerly. To be a part of a social introduction, to feel his own hand shaken in friendship and acceptance—it was a thing that had not happened for a long time.

The pianist had been joined by a saxophonist and the music became louder and faster. The boys' middy collars stood straight out from their backs as they swung the girls about the floor.

"Will you give me the pleasure of this dance, Mac?" asked Pierre, slinging his newly acquired words about with assurance.

"If anyone would have told me," the girl said to the others, "that I'd be a first sergeant and that I'd be jitterbugging with a French sailor on my twenty-first birthday I'd have——"

"Come on, Mac! Shake a leg! How do you like that one? Shake a leg? I learned it tonight before you came." The sailor's shining face was anxious as a child's waiting for praise.

"You fickle Pierre. Have you been allowing someone else to teach you English?"

"It wasn't good English, Mac. She was only a corporal."

He put his arm around her waist and led her on to the dance floor.

"It is dangerous for you to come to a place like this," Eve said. "You might be recognized."

"Not easily. No one is sure of what I look like in spite of the descriptions." Alexis thrust his hands miserably into his pockets and looked around. Now that he was there alone with her his momentary happiness evaporated. He wished he hadn't come. He felt stiff and awkward in this warm lighted room where she was so at ease. He put an edge of sarcasm into his voice. "Due to your generosity," he said, "there are no photographs of me."

"I suppose you talked to Ralph Morley. He must have told you I was here."

"Yes, he told me that—and other things."

"Are you angry because I asked him to follow you?"

"How can I be angry when it was he who rescued me from the police this noon? If I came here for nothing else I should have come to thank you. Or rather Trout Publications."

"The magazine had nothing to do with this. Why do you find it so difficult to believe that I alone want to help you?"

"In that case you must misunderstand. I am not here as a member of the Underground. I am not a patriot performing a duty, a glamorous character inspired only by love of country. What I do, I do for my own reasons. I am a murderer plotting to kill. I doubt if you would want to help. Would you?"

He was not much taller than she and her eyes were almost on a level with his own. He looked insolently into them, seeing the reflection of himself in their pupils and the yellow flecks in the brown irises. He remembered Denise's eyes, the same color as these but darker-lashed and set more obliquely in her face, the eyes of his ten-year-old daughter, he remembered, filled with incredulity above the stinging red mark of his fingers on her cheek. The book had fallen to the floor between them and he had kicked it, kicked it frenziedly, until it was a mass of shredded paper. Nothing remained save the stiff gray cover bleating its title: *Eugenics for the Master Race,* and into that he had ground his shoe until the words were scraped from the binding.

His daughter was killed that same night in a basement that had proven no shelter against bombs. When he found her body under the crumbled bricks it seemed to him that her face bore still the incredulous expression of the afternoon, and where his blow had been there was on her cold cheek a smudge of red brick dust. He needn't have worried about the ideas Denise would grow up with, since she was never to grow up at all. But that she had died with a twisted mind, that she had died believing lies—that was the sin of Henri Charles Morin. When he lifted her eyelid with his thumb he thought he saw the horror of his own violence mirrored in the brown, yellow-flecked stare. That, too, was the sin of Henri Charles Morin.

In the cafeteria the large man in the tweed coat had said, *You're needed where the killing adds up to more than satisfying your own private vendetta.* What could he know about it? What could this young woman (the waiter said, *She has seen a soldier's leg blown off by a mine and photographed the result with the most stunning technique*) with the unscarred eyes know about it?

He said, filled with bitterness and wanting to hurt her, "Because my accent is of Paris and not of—let us say—Chicago, does that make me different? You would not offer your protection to a common criminal, would you?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes. I think I would if I knew that he—that he was fighting back at those who had hurt him so terribly as you have been hurt. It isn't right to ask a man to sit quietly and accept such things. He becomes less than a man. Yes, I would help him. You—since it is you."

"Do they teach that kind of morality here in America?"

He saw her nostrils quiver as she took a long breath.

"I wish I knew why you came here at all," she said.

The music stopped and started again. The sailors and girls formed a conga line and snaked across the room. From the center of it a hand shot up and waved.

"Hi," yelled Pierre. "Come and shake a leg."

As the dancers went by the vibrations shook the floor.

"Let's go into the other room," Eve suggested. "It's quieter and we can have a drink—if you have time."

As he followed her, watching her soft, free-swinging hair and slight shoulders in front of him, he wanted to plead, you must be generous again, you must pardon me. I have no power over the words. They come. They are not what I mean. When they sat down, he would tell her.

The bar was full of sailors and girls sitting around the tables, their glasses in front of them, the air blue with drifting smoke from their cigarettes. As Eve and Alexis passed a crowded table in the center of the room, a girl suddenly stood up on a chair and clapped her hands for attention. Her long, sleek legs and mass of bright orange hair gave her a look as unreal as a billboard painting. The sailors whistled and yelled and scrambled over from the other tables to form a circle around her. Alexis stood imprisoned beside Eve in the press of bodies.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Who is she?"

"That's Miss Ports-of-the-Great-Lakes," Eve explained. "She won a beauty contest out in the Middle West somewhere. She's the guest entertainer here tonight."

The girl bent down and lifted a cap from the head of a smiling sailor. She perched it rakishly on top of her curls. The boys cheered and stamped.

"Thanks, kids," she said when they had quieted a bit. "I can't tell you how glad I am to be here." Her voice was tiny and prim. It went well with her round pink-and-white baby-doll face. "And I want to tell you, too, that I think these caps you wear are the cutest things I've ever seen. I was telling Max—he's my press agent—there he is sitting over there. He's a nice guy. Give him a hand, kids." She waited while the boys obliged. "As I was saying, I said to Max, Why can't American sailor boys have cute caps like these? Our Navy hasn't got any imagination! But then, I said to Max, the French have always been famous for that little extra something." She winked, and the boy's whistles sirened from wall to wall.

"Now, kids," she said, "I'm going to sing you a cute little song. It's about love and sailors and coming home. I have a boy friend, too——" The whistles turned to groans. Miss Ports-of-the-Great-Lakes smiled—a smile full of tender condolence for all of them. "He's with the

American Navy on the sea. So I have a very special place in my heart for sailors. Now I'll sing this song through once and I want you to join me in on the second chorus. Ready?"

She sang:

"Shoo-shoo, shoo baby
Shoo-shoo, shoo baby
Bye, bye, bye baby"

Her red-tipped hands waved in the air. Her hips squirmed to the rhythm.

*"Your papa's off to the seven seas . . ."**

When that song and two encores were over and Miss Ports-of-the-Great-Lakes subsided to merely sitting down and having a glass of wine with the boys, Eve and Alexis found an empty table in the corner.

"You have your choice," Eve told him, "le vin ordinaire or le cherry soda."

"Wine, please. But let me get it. If you would show me where——"

"No. You stay here. I have the tickets."

She went to the bar and stood in line waiting her turn and listening to the banter at the singer's table just behind her. Suddenly she heard the piping baby-doll voice.

"Why, look, Max—there's our cute waiter. Remember the one who was always making mistakes and apologizing last night at the Athenian Room!"

"Sure. That's the guy the police want in the Lejeune case. I'm going to call a cop."

"Max, leave him alone. What do you want to do that for? He was so cute."

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*"Shoo-Shoo Baby." Copyright, 1943, by Leeds Music Corporation, New York, N. Y. Reprinted here by permission of the copyright owners.

"You dope. You'll get front-page publicity if you turn him in. It's great. It's a heaven-made break for us."

"Do I have to give heaven 10 per cent too?"

"Listen, baby, I'm going to find a phone. When I come back I'll give you your lines."

Eve didn't wait for the wine. She pushed her way back through the crowd to Alexis.

"Come on," she whispered. "We've got to get out of here quick. You've been recognized."

She pulled him with her into the checkroom, and while she was putting on her coat she told him what she'd heard.

"Now don't say anything. Do what I tell you. It'll be all right."

Into his arms she piled two bulky reflector lamps and a box of bulbs. She picked up her camera case and led the way to the stairs.

"Going already, Miss Stokes?" asked the girl at the door.

Eve nodded and smiled.

"Good night. Tell Mrs. DeWitt I'll stop in with the proofs sometime this week."

As they reached the bottom step two policemen walked in.

"Wait a minute here," said one of them, "we're looking for——"

"What is it, officer?" Eve asked eagerly. "We're from *Photonews*. We've been getting some shots of the beauty queen upstairs. What's up now?"

"Nothing. Nothing exciting," said the other one. "Just taking a look around." He held the door open for them. As they stepped out into the cold street they heard him say, "Damn picture-takers. We want to do this nice and quiet, see. Mrs. DeWitt is a big society dame, and she——"

In the taxi Eve said, "We'll go up to the office. I'll sign in for you with the night elevator man and you can sleep up there tonight. No one will bother you, and if the cleaning women come in, it won't be the first time one of the boys has stayed all night. It's the safest place I can think of."

"They'll be calling you when they hear I was with you in the canteen."

"They might. I can take care of that. Little Miss Ports-of-the-Great-Lakes uses her eyes for so much more than seeing she's gotten out of practice. She made a mistake. I'll convince her or anybody else."

"There is something I wanted to ask you"—Alexis contemplated her dim face over the reflectors he still held clasped in his arms—"I wanted to ask you to pardon my rudeness of before. But you've done that—and much more already."

"And you're not grateful to me?" Eve suggested softly.

"No."

"It disturbs you. It upsets your conviction?"

"Yes."

"You weren't planning to spend tonight sleeping?"

"No."

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALL THE WAY HOME the vision of Alexis stretched out on Newton's red leather couch stayed with Eve. She felt helpless about him and depressed. Her reasoning and her entreaties seemed like schoolgirl talk against the ravaging thirst for revenge within him. Once she had thought he was faltering—for a moment when they had stood together at the window looking out over the lighted city, but the moment had passed without leaving a mark. His single purpose, his drive toward self-destruction and his indifference to it—it wasn't human. Or am I the one who is not human? she asked herself desperately. Is it that I don't have the emotional capacity to understand?

She was putting the key in the outer door of the apartment house when a hand grasped her elbow. She jerked away and turned furiously to see who it was.

"You're very unfriendly, aren't you?" said a familiar voice. She threw her arms around the large, bulky figure standing there and pressed her face into its scratchy tweed coat.

She said, "I was going to phone you the minute I got upstairs. Where've you been?"

"Freezing my face off out here waiting for you. You might have been generous enough to offer me a key to your apartment for emergencies like this. I'm practically a convalescent case. No one could misunderstand."

"No one but me," she said. "I thought you were—what the deuce do they call it?—in love with me, and here it is your last twenty-four hours and I've practically not seen you at all."

"Hold on there. That's not my fault. You've been giving me a story about having to work, about how busy you are."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" She was instantly exasperated. "All you had to do was ask me to get out of it. I would have told the boss I had to have the time off. You didn't ask me."

"I seem to remember I did. Last night after that Lejeune thing I——"

"But you didn't insist."

He held her an arm's length away from him and shook his head.

"My God," he said, "the whole world can go up in flames but women go on forever."

She blinked back at him curiously. "What's happened to you?" she asked. "Your face is swollen. You look funny."

He took the key out of her hand and put it in the lock and they went upstairs.

They were in the kitchen waiting for the coffee to percolate. The broken wrist watch lay on the white porcelain table top and Ralph was telling Eve the story of his evening. He began at the beginning with his glimpse of the cigarette case in the lady's hand in the lobby and followed it through to his rescue by Captain Dan Hammett III.

"And so," he finished, "here I am. Heavyweight champion of John Hay High invalided out by a hot-tempered one hundred and fifteen-pound gigolo."

"Darling, are you hurt? How's your poor head?"

"When they gave me a new one they evidently made it unbreakable."

"Sure you're not in pain?"

"Nope. Not now."

"Then, damn it, quit stalling and tell me who the lady in 509 is!"

"Ah!" He gave her a cat-full-of-canary grin and produced the little newspaper photograph from his pocket, the one he had taken from the small suitcase in the hotel room, and handed it to her.

"Recognize this?"

"Thank goodness I was born too late to wear a hat like that!"

"Don't boast. Who does that gal look like to you?"

"She does look familiar. She looks like—— But that's impossible!"

"Say it."

"Like Newton Trout's lady friend."

"Right. That's who she is. She has the cigarette case."

The bell on the stove signaled that the coffee was done. When Ralph saw that Eve wasn't going to move he got up and turned it off himself. He filled their cups.

Eve's voice came back. "But then she's—— But who is she really then?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I thought I'd try our morgue at the office in the morning and ask you to try yours. What's the date of that hat?"

"Early 1920s."

"The trouble is it'll take hours to go through the files and we may not find a thing. By the way, I wonder what the chances are of your protégé getting past that little judo expert tonight and bumping Mrs. W. off?"

"Not much of a chance, I don't think."

Eve explained what had happened at the canteen.

"And you left him sleeping in Trout's office!"

She nodded. "It's fantastic. I'm sure he had no idea of their connection." She was examining the picture again. "It's a Braunwitz photograph. Maybe he'd remember."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"No, he's not dead—yet. He's here in New York. I know him. Some of us have been helping him out. He was destitute and sick when he came over."

"Can we go to see him? Can we go right away? There may not be time tomorrow—and I've got to know, Eve. I've got to be able to tell them back there. It may enable them to get on to the others, to prevent any further operations——"

"Braunwitz is old. His mind is wandering. He may not recall anything about her."

"But it's worth a try, isn't it? Where does he live? Call him up and ask if we can see him right away."

"He hasn't a telephone. He lives in a couple of rooms on Lapham Street above a delicatessen shop. It's not far from here."

Eve took a bottle of brandy out of the cupboard and put it in a brown paper bag.

"Come on," she said. "Part of his illness is that he doesn't sleep."

Ralph's wrist watch was running perfectly in spite of its shattered crystal. It said eleven thirty-five when he buckled it on his wrist.

"You learn easily, don't you?" said Eve.

They walked down the street leaning against the harsh whistling wind. There wasn't a cab in sight.

"It's about ten blocks," said Eve; "do you think you can make it?"

"Since Tunisia this is my favorite kind of weather," Ralph replied, feeling the good cold taste of snow on his tongue.

A light fell across the sidewalk in the center of the block. It came from a tiny shop in the basement of a brownstone. A sign on it said:

WATCHMAKER
KEYS WHILE U WAIT

In the center of the snow-flecked windowpane hung a service flag with one blue star. Ralph and Eve stopped to look in.

They could see a bald man, a magnifying glass screwed into one eye, tinkering over the back of a watch. Before him on the table was a clutter of tools, springs, and various assorted viscera of watches, and a fat gray cat asleep.

"I bet a guy who keeps hours like this could get my watch fixed by tomorrow," said Ralph. "Any fancy place I take it—they'll tell me it'll be ready in three weeks don't I know there's a war on."

Eve burrowed her face into her coat collar.

"We could get warm in there for a minute. Let's ask him and see."

At their knock they saw the cat awake and spring from the table. The bald man looked up and frowned. Then he rose and unlocked the door.

Ralph said, "We saw your light and we want to ask about an emergency watch repair. May we come in?"

The bald man held the door open, and they walked into the stuffy, metallic-smelling little shop. The cat leaped onto the key machine and regarded them sleepily.

Ralph showed the proprietor his wrist watch and explained his urgency. The bald man looked at it, nodded, and reached for a claim check, filling in the name blank without asking a question. He tore off the numbered tag and handed it to Ralph.

"I saw your name on the back of the watch case, but I would recognize you anyway," he said, "from the newspaper pictures. My son is a mechanic at a base in England. He wrote me about you, about your visit with his outfit. It was the first letter I got from him that was serious. Most the time he'd write me jokes. Pop, why is an English girl like a bicycle tire? Such jokes. Then you stayed five days with his outfit. Pop, he wrote, this fellow understands GIs. He's like one of us only he knows the words to tell about it. He can teach people what's what with fellows like us."

The watchmaker shuffled to the back of his shop and took a picture off the wall. It was a snapshot enlarged and framed, not very clear, of a grinning boy. Indifferent to regulations, he had cocked his visored army cap over one ear and from beneath it his eyes wisecracked right out of the paper.

"This is my son. His name is Rudy. Rudy Wilhelm. You can see how he is." The father peered anxiously up into Ralph's face. "I know you wouldn't remember him out of so many, but"—he made an apologetic gesture—"to me he is the whole United States Army. You know what I mean."

Ralph said, "I know, Mr. Wilhelm." He couldn't think of anything else to say. He watched the old man return the picture to its nail and his mind was very far away, back at the muddy landing fields, back with the ground crews fussing over the bombers like anxious nursemaids, back in the briefing rooms, the canteens, the barracks where empty bunks waited for sleepers who would be sleeping forever in another land.

It was a gasp from Eve that broke his mood. She had moved around behind the worktable and was leaning over to look at the watch that Mr. Wilhelm had been repairing. It was a gold pocket watch, very thin, with the warm rubbed look of age and use. The lid of its case was made double, so it could be used as a place for carrying a photograph, a lock of hair, or any other sentimental souvenir. This partition was open, and into it Eve was staring.

Ralph walked up behind her and looked over her shoulder. When he reached out to pick up the watch his hand was shaking.

"That is a curious timepiece, is it not?" asked the watchmaker, perceiving their interest. "Swiss. About fifty years old. Never had one just like it in here before." He screwed the magnifying glass back into his eye and contemplated the watch with them. "I'm not sure I can fix it. It needs a special part. You see here in the mechanism . . ." He began to explain what was wrong with the watch.

But it was not the mechanism that held Ralph and Eve stupefied while he talked. It was the photograph that lay pressed into the partition of the lid, a photograph of a beautiful woman in a cloche, an exact duplicate of the picture they were taking to Braunwitz to be identified.

"Whose—whose watch is it?" Ralph asked in as disinterested a tone as he could manage.

"The lady who owns the gift shop around the corner brought it in. One of her friends or customers, I don't know, asked her if she knew where it could be repaired by tomorrow morning and she offered to bring it to me." Mr. Wilhelm shook his head. "It's hard to hurry with a watch, but people always complain when I tell them so. They are not content that time rushes by, they must look at a clock every five minutes to prove it. Of course," he added, "in your case it is entirely different."

He went to the door with them, and when Ralph held out his hand, he said, "Good night, Mr. Morley, and don't thank me. I like to keep myself busy. You know how it is."

When they were well past the shop they hurried their steps almost to a run, silently, each aware of the other's thoughts. They turned the corner onto the Avenue. The gift shop was the third door up. As much as they could see of the interior had an air of swank and good taste. A light shone in the window on a display of Mexican wares: handblown blue and green glasses and pitchers, large colored baskets, glazed clay casseroles, shiny tin trays and candleholders. Stenciled in black on a lower corner of the glass they read "Send the Gift from Roselle."

"Who is Roselle? What is she?" hummed Ralph. Then in a musing tone, "Now what do you suppose goes on in there besides a brisk trade in pickle dishes?"

"A friend of mine could be having a wedding," said Eve. "I could drop in tomorrow and look around for a present."

"Do people still have weddings?"

"Sure. They snatch an hour after work, or between assignments, or they skip lunch. It's like going to the top of the Empire State Building. Something everyone means to do but only a few have time for."

"Is that so?" Ralph dropped the joke abruptly. His mind was on the watch and the curious coincidence of the photographs. He took Eve's arm and they began to walk toward Lapham Street again. He said aloud, "It may be just one of those coincidences. It may not mean a thing."

"Maybe it's Mrs. W.'s watch."

"But it's a man's, and why the hurry about getting it repaired?"

"Perhaps she expects to leave town suddenly. The French Revenge Deaths have frightened her. She suspects she's to be a victim and is getting ready to flee."

"But if she thought her life was in danger, why would she stick around waiting for a watch or for anything? No. Let's try it another way. It isn't Mrs. W.'s watch. It belongs to someone else. Someone else brings it to Roselle. She can't handle it in her shop but she knows a dealer or a collector who might want it. She gets it fixed so she can sell it and collect a commission. The hurry up is because whoever owns it needs the money."

"Why would they leave the photograph in there?"

"They simply haven't bothered to remove it yet. Or they don't know about the partition. If this theory is correct, we may now consider something more interesting. Whose watch was it in the first place?"

"Queer. If we hadn't stopped in the watchmaker's we'd never have had this problem."

"If I didn't wear my wrist watch in my trouser pocket, we'd never have had to stop. If I didn't have an aversion to wearing rings, watches, jewelry of any sort, I wouldn't have put it in my pocket. Et cetera."

"Have you such an aversion?"

"Since childhood. My favorite uncle used to give me his cigar bands to wear on my chubby fingers. One night he ran away with my nurse. It dates from there. Freudian, eh?"

"I suppose you have an aversion to nurses too."

"No. There wouldn't be any sense to that."

"See that delicatessen shop?" Eve said, pointing up and across the street. "Braunwitz lives in that building."

"Tell me about him. He was quite a success in his day, wasn't he?"

"Tops. He was one of Steiglitz's pupils. He considered photography an art as much as painting or music, and that's the way he practiced it. Everyone who took portrait photography seriously went to study with him. He traveled all over Europe looking for models, picking them up off the streets, anywhere. Later, when the Royal Academy got excited about him, all the rich and titled ladies in Europe came to sit for him. They paid fabulous fees. I take it Mrs. W. was of the later period."

"Did the Nazis kick him out of Vienna?"

"He didn't wait for that. He took his camera and his prints to Paris and kept a step ahead of them for a long time. When they started for Paris he fled to Spain. We don't know what happened exactly, but the car that had all his stuff in it overturned and burned on the way. George Campe, a photographer for the P.L.A., found him in Lisbon wandering around half crazy and in rags. George wrote to some of us here and we got him over about a year ago. He's a very broken old man."

They passed the frosty lighted windows of the delicatessen. Eve turned into the building entrance and led the way upstairs. A metal number two hung askew on the dusty wooden door. Eve knocked lightly and turned the knob.

"Good evening, Herr Braunwitz," she called. "It's Eve Stokes."

Ralph was shocked at the sight of the man sitting in the rocker facing them. He had been prepared for age but not such a literal manifestation of it. Braunwitz looked like a faded calendar version of Father Time. Light from a bare bulb shone on his white hair and crinkled onion-skin complexion. His eyelids were so bagged and droopy they left only slits for his eyes to peep through. His voice was cracked, but it was amazing that any voice at all came from that pipe-like neck above the open bathrobe collar.

After the introductions and the long drink of brandy, Braunwitz looked more alive. Eve explained why they were there and showed him the photograph.

"Of course it is so long ago," she said soothingly, "you may not remember anything about this woman——"

"I remember everything about her." Braunwitz barely glanced at the photograph and handed it back. "She is not the kind one forgets, Fräulein, even after many years, and many pictures in between. Notice the highlights on the left eye, on the bones at the base of the throat, on the brooch and the knuckles of the hand. A technically perfect photograph—although it is hard for you to tell—that paper is so coarse, so cheap. Is it a clipping from a clandestine sheet perhaps?"

"We don't know," said Ralph. "It might be."

The old man nodded. "It might be all right, all right. It must be. What other newspaper is published on stuff like that? Good for them. Good for them," he muttered to himself. He poured some more brandy. His hand jerked like a wound-up mechanical toy, spilling the drink down the sides of the glass. He seemed lost in contemplation of the rivulets racing over the table.

"Do you remember her name, Herr Braunwitz?" Ralph prompted.

"When I took the photograph her name was Charlotte Whidden. I had gone to Cannes for a rest. She was there, and so was Baron Von Afeldt. The brooch she is wearing

—diamonds out of a child's tale. They reflected so much light I was afraid for the picture. I asked her to remove the brooch. 'Oh no,' she told me, and I can still see the sly old look on her young face, 'I cannot do that. I have not come for a photograph of myself,' she said, 'but for a photograph of myself and the jewels.' That interested me. I tried to put into the picture the story of that girl and of a dissolute old baron in a hotel by the sea."

"Charlotte Whidden is the name she goes by now, too, but do you know of any connection she might have had with a man whose initial was D?" asked Ralph.

"Certainly. She married Maurice Dupras nine or ten years ago. She came to me in Vienna for another picture. I refused to take it. By then she was no longer interested in diamonds. Oh no. By then she was interested in Nazis and in national destiny and in murder. She wanted to pose in a white blouse with her yellow hair in braids around her head. Inspiration for the pure-blooded Aryan." The old man's eyes glittered in their fleshy nests. "I threw her out. And the next day I said good-by to a whole lifetime and I left for Paris. I had one consolation. I thought in Paris I would see Maurice Dupras and his wife jailed or hung." He darted a sardonic glance at them. "So I was wrong," he said, shrugging, "but I was an artist, not a politician; I wasn't informed about these things."

"Wait a minute," Ralph said, stopping in front of the frosted delicatessen window when they were once more out on the street. "I seem to remember that all I had for dinner was chocolate cake. It was very monotonous. Let's go in here a minute."

They went in and stood before the high glass counter. Bars of long salami hung down from the ceiling, and they peered between them like hungry prisoners, watching a little gray-haired man with a bulbous nose slice corned beef. The wonderful smell of the meats, the cheeses, the fresh breads, the coffee enveloped them, and they were famished. The little man's nose twitched continuously, as with the very pleasure of breathing in such an atmosphere. He made the sliced beef into a sandwich, put a sliver of dill pickle beside it, and handed the plate over to a waiter.

"What can I do for you?" he asked Ralph.

"Two more just like that one, please."

The little man nodded and flourished his knife at a loaf of bread.

"Make it three," Ralph said. He looked at Eve questioningly, but she shook her head. "Make it four anyway," he added; "if she doesn't eat hers, I will."

"You got to be hungry to eat three corned-beef sandwiches like I make," the little man warned. The knife sliced off some more bread. "I don't mind making them—but I don't like to see them thrown out." He scowled at a half-filled plate a waitress was carrying by. "Nibblers," he muttered. "I hate nibblers."

The steaming corned beef was speared on his black-handled fork and his knife was pressing through it with skillful strokes. "My wife says what's the difference it's paid for. Okay, so for me there's a difference. I make them, she doesn't. She rings the cash register all day. How could she understand what I feel? Mustard?" he asked.

"Yes," said Eve. "No pickles."

The little man leaned over the counter and regarded Eve with exasperation. "Young lady," he said, "don't you think I know that without your telling me?"

"Why—why no," said Eve. "How would you?"

"Because"—he gave her a long, slow wink—"when a pretty girl and a handsome gentleman come in for sandwiches at this hour I do not suppose they want pickles. My wife says so who cares you give a pickle with every sandwich. Okay, so I care. I do not promote garlic at one o'clock in the morning."

His broad pudgy fingers laid several pieces of beef on the bread and covered them over with the remaining slices. His knife divided them into halves.

"Will you wrap them to go, please?" Ralph said.

The little man put down his knife. "Certainly I'll wrap them. Don't you think I know you don't want to eat them *here!*" He glared. "Do you think I am blind like—like"—he picked up a round of meat and slapped it down—"like a bologna!"

When they were out of doors Eve sniffed appreciatively. "I can smell them right through the paper. Don't be too sure you're going to get my second one either."

"That's all right." Ralph tucked her arm through his and they fought the wind down the street. "All I have to do is think of that repulsive little rat Dupras and I lose my appetite. So that's who she was! Mrs. Maurice Dupras!"

"Don't think about it now. Remember, no nibbling."

"Maybe that guy shouldn't be allowed around loose with sharp knives."

"Why? He was darling. He just wanted us to know that he knew we——"

"Cupid with your corned beef. Well, are we?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DINING ROOM at the St. Martin Hotel was not the place Charlotte would have chosen for today's luncheon. It was plush, large, and restrained in everything but price. The menu was lengthy, the chefs were skillful, and to the initiated the food afforded any number of subtle delights. There seemed to be a tacit agreement among the patrons that feeding was a function of major importance. There was, of course, no music.

Charlotte was aware that she had a very delicate performance to give and she longed for the support of a setting. She wanted the sound of highly nerved laughter and conversation, the mood-evoking strains of a small orchestra, the stimulus of curious glances from strangers. At the St. Martin no one was curious about anything but the reactions of his palate. The eyes of the gourmets walking past her now, as she sat waiting in the cocktail room, reflected nothing but their appetites. They looked at her with neither admiration nor interest. It was shattering. She had to glance into her purse mirror to restore her self-confidence. What she saw was faultless. She wore a purple suit and hat that made a fine background for her shining gold hair. Her lipstick had exactly enough blue in it to accompany the purple. An amethyst pin sparkled on her lapel. It had been a gift from Newton, and though she had worn it often before, today it had a new significance. See this? she wanted it to say. You have put your mark upon me and I have accepted. You have adorned me for your pleasure and I am yours.

She remembered when it had come, an inarticulate peace offering accompanied by the usual scrawled signature on the card. That quarrel had marked a turning point in their relationship. She had been near enough to losing him that time, near enough to realize what a severe loss it would be. She couldn't risk it again. In the two, or was it three months since their quarrel, the thing between them had been like a jiggling scale and she on constant guard to keep the balance, throwing some weight first to one side then to the other, like an apprehensive chemist. This affair was her last and greatest gamble, and she mustn't lose.

The very urgency of it frightened her. In the old days she had picked and chosen her men at will, and there had always been more men and more time. Now time had caught up with her. The wrinkles that she went to bed with were still on her face in the morning when she awoke, and her vitality was not replenished overnight any more than her bank account. The money was getting dangerously low, the dresses would be getting shabby, the war went on and on, and no more word from F. She thought of the cigarette case in her bag and his mysterious letter and all her cables that had remained unanswered. Who was F.'s friend in Mexico and when was he coming? She recalled suddenly Mr. Vincenti's remarks about his trip to Mexico and the lightly veiled insinuation that she might accompany him. If everything else failed, she thought that might be one way to escape from New York. Perhaps, if she went there, she could make discreet inquiries about any friends of F.'s. She saw herself sitting beside Mr. Vincenti in a train compartment, and she saw his face cocky and dark and passionate and his tiny, strong-fingered hands. Tears of revulsion and self-pity sprang to her eyes and she found herself weeping right into the face of a very cheerful young captain. He wore the uniform of the American Army and a striped overseas ribbon above his left pocket.

"Could I be of service to you, ma'am?" he was saying. "Could I ease your distress? Could I mend your broken heart? Could I buy you a martini to cry into?"

His voice was soft and twanging and his words were blurred partly by his Southern accent and partly, Charlotte thought, by the gin he had been drinking. His breath seemed laden with a half-dozen martinis, his eyes were a little loose in his head, but he was very good-looking. She fumbled in her purse for a handkerchief and dried her tears.

"No," she said; "no, thank you."

He put his glass on the table and sat down. "May I offer you a pretzel, ma'am?" He pushed the bowl over to her. "It is meager Yankee fare, ma'am, but it is all there seems to be."

"No," she said; "thank you very much."

"But isn't there something I can do for you, ma'am?" He drew back and contemplated her, his head cocked to one side like a friendly spaniel's. "Seein' you mourn like that disturbs me mightily, ma'am. Just say the word and I'll hunt the bastard down for you, like a houn' dog hunts a possum."

"That's very gallant of you, Captain," she said, "but there is no one really."

"I have a great respect for American womanhood," the captain said. "That's what I'm personally fightin' this war for, ma'am. The other gentlemen, they may be fightin' for streamlined iceboxes and streamlined helicopters, but I'm fightin' for streamlined womanhood." He ran his hands over his blouse. "Could you lend a soldier a cigarette, honey? I must have left mine at Belinda's. By God—take Belinda, there's a fine example of American womanhood!"

Charlotte offered him her open case, but instead of taking a cigarette he lifted the whole case out of her hands. She was about to remonstrate, to take it back, but he was just a bit mellow, she thought, and harmless.

He stared into the case. "Yes ma'am," he said, "some of the boys are fightin' for blueberry pie and the seven popular brands of tobacco—but not me." He put a cigarette in his mouth and closed the case, still holding it in his hands and gazing down at it.

"Any chance of your—your lunch companion not showin' up, honey?"

She shook her head. He was handsome, she thought, in what is called the long, loose-knit way of American boys, and his eyes were very blue and merry and he couldn't have been much over twenty. She was almost twice his age, and yet he didn't seem to notice it. She would have liked to have gone with him from bar to bar, laughing, making gay, impermanent talk, forgetting yesterday and tomorrow. Twenty years ago she had known boys like this in Paris, left over from the last war, but her ambition then had given her no time for one uncalculated episode. And it was the same now.

"Maybe you'd better go," she said gently. "I'm meeting someone, and I'm afraid that——"

"Civilian?" he asked instantly. "You can see him any time. I've only got twenty-four hours, honey, and then back I go, back to the mud and the——"

"But—but I'm, I'm quite a bit older than you." The words sprang spontaneously from her lips, and hearing them she was shocked at herself. "You ought to find some nice young girl to do the town with—this Belinda——"

The captain drained his glass and stood up. His mouth was tight and hurt.

"I'm gettin' almighty sick and tired of this big-sister-Red-Cross-Field-Director treatment," he said, "and I bid you good day, ma'am."

He turned, but before he could take a step Charlotte spoke a sharp command.

"Please return my cigarette case," she said. She half rose out of her chair, but when he backed around his face was so obviously contrite, she relaxed.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am." He put it down on the table and she noticed his hands were shaking. War nerves, she thought, and drink. She watched him walk with noticeable unsteadiness toward the door. She watched his lithe back in its tan gabardine, and she felt suddenly pleased. In a city full of pretty young girls he'd chosen her. She consulted her mirror again. When Newton arrived a few minutes later her eyes were quite dry and clear.

"Man, if I thought I talked like that when I'm really drinkin', I'd quit drinkin'." The young captain took a long swallow of his martini and shook his head at Ralph.

They were sitting in a bar around the block from the St. Martin, the two of them side by side on the tall stools and the drink in front of Captain Hammett was only the second he had had that day.

"You're absolutely certain about the case?" Ralph asked again.

"It's a dead ringer for yours, I'm tellin' you. I had it in my hands. I saw the J on the inside, and the same engraved stuff on the outside as yours has. For a minute there I got excited. I thought I really was goin' to be able to walk out with it. I'm dreadfully sorry, sir."

"It's all right." Ralph batted his glass back and forth between his hands on the slippery counter. He looked up suddenly. "She didn't suspect anything, did she?"

"Why no, sir. It was excellent corn, if I may be so immodest. Very convincin'. That's the word the critic in Boston used when we opened with *Julep Time* there. 'Dan Hammett, who played the young Southern drunk, was very convincin'.' "

"That the show you said closed after six performances?"

"Yeah. The New York critics convinced everybody to stay away. But today I was sure fire. I honestly do take pride in today. I gave her the little ole routine about one more night and then back to the front. I almost had her fallin' for it until she got maternal."

Ralph continued the volley ball with his glass. He wondered what had happened last night and whether or not Alexis had left Trout's office and gone back to the Larchmont Hotel. And had the little judo expert been there to meet him? And had Mrs. Whidden discovered the slit in her luggage? He felt for his wrist watch and grimaced as he remembered.

"What time do you have, Captain?"

"One o'clock, sir."

He paid the check and got off his stool.

"Will I be seein' you again, sir?" asked the captain.

"I hope so. I'll give you a ring."

"I want to tell you this little incident has made me feel mighty braced up, sir. As if I haven't lost touch, don't you know?"

"You were swell to do it," Ralph told him. "I owe you all kinds of thanks."

But the captain wasn't listening. Two girls in silver-fox jackets with little bushy silver-fox hats on their heads had come in and were mounting stools farther down the bar. They went through what Ralph had noticed was the usual routine of women at the bar—a routine as formalized as a dance by the Rockettes. First they crossed their legs, then they tossed their packs of cigarettes on the counter in front of them, then they peered between the bottles at the mirror behind the bar to check their make-up, then they ordered drinks, and finally they stuck cigarettes into their mouths and looked about inquiringly for matches. These gals never carried matches. If they couldn't borrow a light, life wouldn't be worth living. The match, Ralph decided, is the greatest social catalyst of all time.

The captain was already standing with a folder of them in his hand.

"So long, kid," said Ralph. "Be convincing."

The boy winked. "The little ole routine, eh?"

From the checkroom, where he was getting his hat and coat, Ralph looked back. The captain was flanked by silver-fox capes distinctly aquiver with sympathy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WAITER lifted the hot silver cover of the dish and deftly spooned the veal kidneys with Madeira sauce on to Newton's plate. Newton regarded the food and the woman across the table from him with the same appreciation—both were expensive and sophisticated. He began to talk of his activities since he had seen Charlotte last. To her sharp discomfort the conversation concerned mostly what the tabloids had labeled "The French Revenge Deaths." It was exactly the kind of story *Photonews* could make into an excellent feature, Newton explained. If the police would, he said, be so efficient as to nab the unknown and elusive Frenchman in time for him to secure an interview, the coverage would be complete. He planned to handle the story in its larger aspects as a study of revenge.

"A professor out at Columbia is writing us an article on the psychology of revenge," he explained. "I feel this Frenchman is some kind of a psychopath. From those notes he wrote he's likely to take a notion that almost anyone is responsible for his woes and the betrayal of France, as he puts it. Tell me, my dear, in all your years in France are you quite sure you have not offended this little maniac yourself?"

What was he leading up to? Did he know more than she suspected? Had he perhaps known all the time? Fright stabbed at Charlotte as she lifted her glass and drank, her eyes gazing over its rim for some sign, some indication in his face.

"I'm not sure," she said, making her voice surface-light, "I have offended a great many people in my time. That fellow could be one of them. Would it make a good story for you if I were his next victim?"

"Excellent. But I prefer to forego it."

"How uncharacteristic of you!"

"Yes." He laughed explosively. He was in a good humor. Was it, she asked herself, because he knew something, because he had the advantage of her?

"How do you feel about this business of revenge?" he was asking. "How do you feel about taking an eye for an eye——"

She made a gesture of distaste. "When one does that one becomes the slave of emotion."

"Does that disgust you? Must you always act on the mental level?"

"I find it the most convenient way to exist."

"That interests me. I thought the female especially would do anything for revenge."

"I suppose I'm not the typical female."

"You are whatever it suits your purpose to be, my dear."

He put his knife and fork down on his empty plate and lighted a cigarette. There was still the time to be spent over dessert and coffee but she was afraid to wait any longer. She had to know, to get the question asked and answered. With a sensation as if she were diving from some dizzy height, she said, "Newton, it suits me to be whatever pleases you."

He cued her perfectly.

"And your purpose?"

"To be your wife."

He leaned back, the cigarette pointing from the corner of his mouth. With his chin thrust up like that she could see the wrinkled folds of his throat above his collar. His eyes squinting past the smoke caught the direction of her glance.

"Yes," he said, "I'm old in comparison to the men you could have. I am not a better lover. I am ugly. I'm conceited and domineering. But I'm rich. I think you're being very clever. It would pay off in the items you like to be married to me."

The waiter wheeled a cart up to their table. She looked over the mosaic of pastries on it and shook her head. Newton indicated his own choice, and when the waiter left them, he said,

"For my part, I should require you to look and dress exquisitely and to preside in my home as a flawless hostess. I should like to possess you for the reason I like to possess any object—to arouse the envy of other men. That would be my only reason for marrying you."

It was a humiliating little speech, as he had meant it to be, but Charlotte received it without a change of expression. With, in fact, a measure of respect. He was eating as if he had forgotten her. She drank her coffee slowly and watched him. She was sure now that he would accept the fact of her having been Dupras' wife when she chose to reveal it, and the fact of her danger. He would help her because that was the kind of game he approved of. They understood each other. Each would have from the marriage what he or she wanted. And whatever else she wanted could be gotten elsewhere. Discreetly, however, discreetly. The one tremendous quarrel during the long months of their affair had been over her acceptance of the attentions of another man. It was his sexual prestige which must be guarded above all, his precious self-esteem.

Suddenly he said, "By the way, if you're free this afternoon, I promised to show up at a shindig here. An auction for United Nations Relief. It starts in the ballroom at two-thirty."

He knew very well she was free and at his disposal, but he liked to think he was consulting her wishes, he liked to act out the conventions.

"Yes," she said, pretending to consider. "I think I can go with you. I'd like to."

Was he going to say no more about her proposal? she wondered, or did he consider it settled? Time was vital to her now. Time was the most important thing. She wondered what had happened since she'd seen a newspaper that morning. Had there been another victim found with a note on him? Had the police bagged their quarry? But one must not count on the police, no more than on fate. One must act.

Newton helped her with her coat. She would have to find a way to get a definite answer from him, she thought, perhaps later on the way home.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE auction for United Nations Relief was to be held in the ballroom of the St. Martin. The articles to be auctioned, ranging from an ermine jacket to an autographed copy of *Finnegan's Wake,* had been donated by various organizations and private citizens about town. And Leslie Brotherton was to serve as auctioneer. Brotherton was a telepathist who ordinarily exhibited his powers in a night club or on the stage. His genuine uncanny ability to read minds made him at the moment a famous figure in New York. He was the envy of his competitors and the acknowledged hero of the mystified crowds. In person, Brotherton was a slender, middle-aged man with a sallow complexion and slick black hair. His eyes were black, too, and small, and set deeply into his skull. Since the rest of his face was nondescript and he encouraged its paleness with a light-colored powder, his eyes took on a remarkable intensity, almost a hypnotic quality for those who stared into them.

When Newton and Charlotte arrived at the ballroom, the hundreds of folding chairs were already occupied and the balcony was rapidly filling. They were met at the door by a barrage of photographers' flash bulbs. Newton saw Eve there and waved. Charlotte clung to his arm and smiled her best camera smile. This might be the picture to be released along with the news of their marriage. She had a quick exhilarating vision of it flashed through the syndicates, printed in the papers, in the columns of *Time* and *Photonews.*

After they had been snapped a woman rushed up to Newton. She wore a United Nations badge and a fluttering red ribbon marked "Committee."

"Mr. Trout!" she gasped. "Mr. Trout, we're simply desperate! We didn't hope for nearly such a crowd and we don't have enough articles to auction." She waved her hand vaguely to take in the huge room. "Everyone is here, everyone. Simply oodles of money represented and we've got to take advantage of it. It was my idea to get Brotherton to be our auctioneer and look what I've done." She stared happily at the thronged balcony. "We'll have to turn hundreds away. Simply hundreds."

She put a hot, plump palm on Newton's sleeve. "Mr. Trout, do help us out. We're desperate for more articles and we're asking several people here—people we know are interested—to donate something—anything you may have with you."

"Well, I'll see——" Newton dug his hands into his pockets. "I don't know if——"

"Simply anything," shrilled the committeewoman, and she turned to Charlotte. "Maybe this lady would be kind enough to contribute also."

"Oh yes," said Newton; "forgive me. Mrs. Percy, may I present Mrs. Whidden, my fiancée."

The words sang in Charlotte's head as she accepted Mrs. Percy's congratulations. It was true. Everything was really going to be all right. A rush of exuberance came over her. She opened her bag. Smooth and slim between her wallet and her compact lay the silver cigarette case. It was her most material link with the past, with all that had happened in Algiers, with F. But that was over now. All over forever. She took out the case and thrust it at Mrs. Percy.

"Will this do?" she asked eagerly. "It was made in Paris by Jauvais."

"Oh, my dear," cooed Mrs. Percy. "It's simply lovely. You are very generous. It will fetch a good high price—wait and see."

Newton handed her a fountain pen, and Mrs. Percy went into the proper ecstasies again.

"I'm going to bid for that myself, Mr. Trout. Maybe I'll be able to absorb some of your marvelous literary touch. Simply marvelous."

She hurried away with her prizes, passing Ralph Morley, who had stood a few feet away gaping at the whole scene, passing so close that the case actually brushed against his sleeve as she went by.

After a few preliminary speeches the auction was begun. To Mrs. Percy fell the honor of introducing Leslie Brotherton. She did it with robust waggishness, declaring that if Mr. Brotherton could read her mind at the moment he would understand how simply thrilled she was.

Mr. Brotherton denied in a rare, vibrant voice that reached to the far corners of the room that he received any such flattering brain waves. He did, however, receive from her direction, he announced, a very strong impression of an address: Apartment 2A, 403 Park Avenue. Did she recognize that number? Oh yes, breathed Mrs. Percy. Oh yes, she certainly did. That was the number of an apartment where she was supposed to——

"Wait a minute," Brotherton commanded. "That is the number of an apartment where you were supposed to pick up a Lalique glass vase for the auction, but you forgot."

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Percy, quite red and distressed. "That's true, I did. And we need it so much too."

Brotherton's cavernous dark eyes swept the audience. He pointed an imperious finger toward a marine in the balcony.

"Young man," he called, "am I correct in the impression that you are willing to go to Apartment 2A, 403 Park Avenue, immediately, and bring that Lalique glass vase here to us?"

The marine stood up. "Yes sir."

Much applause.

"And am I correct in the impression that the reason you are so willing is because you know that an attractive young lady named Bebe or Baby or something like that happens to reside in Apartment 2A, 403 Park Avenue?"

"Betty. Yes sir."

Much laughter and applause.

"Off with you then." Brotherton waved the young man out.

A lady standing beside Ralph said, "Isn't he just wonderful?"

Ralph said, "What's the trick?"

"It isn't a trick. He reads minds. He actually does. Haven't you heard of him?"

Ralph shook his head.

"Well, just you wait," the lady said threateningly. "You'd better not be thinking hard about any secrets of your own. He'll tell this whole room about it."

Ralph craned his neck to get a clear view of the articles put out for the auction. By now Brotherton had picked up an oil painting in a rococo gold frame. It was a portrait of a crusty old gentleman in a ruffled collar and blue velvet coat, someone's discarded ancestor, and Brotherton made the most of it.

His patter about each succeeding article was witty. He wheedled the bidders into raising their bids by telling them exactly how much money they had mentally resolved to spend. Time after time gasping, astonished people admitted to the thoughts he snatched out of the air above them. He mystified and entertained, and the large objects on the platform were sold rapidly at high prices.

Finally they were all gone. Brotherton's hand lingered and fumbled over the table where the smaller donations were set out. Then with a darting movement he reached over and picked up the cigarette case. Every nerve in Ralph's body tensed as he saw the silver metal catching the light and flashing between the telepathist's long white fingers. Would the man never speak out, he thought, staring hypnotized as the fingers slid over the box, snapped the catch and examined the inside, closed it, and then moved it in a wide arc for the audience to see.

"A cigarette case," announced the compelling voice, "sterling silver, hand-chased, a very lovely trinket." He gazed intently over the room for an instant. "I receive the impression that there are two people present immensely anxious to own this case. In fact"—he paused—"in fact the waves of concentration on this case come to me stronger, more potently, than on any other object I have yet presented to you." His expression became one of somber curiosity. "This is going to be exciting, my friends. I can tell you definitely that two persons in this audience are determined to own this case at any cost. Attention, Madame Chairman." He turned to Mrs. Percy and bowed. "We are about to make some money."

He looked down at the little box in his hands. "I receive the impression," he said, "that there is more here than meets the eye. You and I, ladies and gentlemen, see only a case for carrying cigarettes. To two—no, wait—to three of those in this audience I believe there is a far greater significance to this object. What is its secret?" His glance spanned the room again. Then he said slowly: "I have the impression that there is great danger and great wealth connected with this object."

The crowd stirred slightly. Here and there someone tittered.

"Isn't he clever?" whispered the lady next to Ralph. "He puts drama into everything."

Ralph's throat was knotted and dry. He saw Mrs. Whidden's white face beside Newton's amused one.

"Do I hear a bid?" asked Brotherton.

"Twenty-five dollars," came a voice from the balcony.

Brotherton snapped his head in the direction of the bidder.

"Now there is a brave man, my friends, but a naïve one. Does he dream that danger or riches can be bought so cheaply?"

"Fifty dollars." This was Newton Trout, smiling.

"One hundred dollars," shouted a woman from the other side of the room.

Brotherton's face became grimmer. "You folks are remarkably unsuperstitious," he said. "I've done my best to warn you."

A pretty girl with long black hair and a fur slung over her shoulder called: "Two hundred dollars."

"Dear young lady," said Brotherton, "I suggest you go up the street to Tiffany's and buy yourself a new cigarette case. This one is not appropriate to youth or gaiety. It will bring you gray hairs before your time."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars." The bid was made in a high, decisive man's voice somewhere near the front of the room.

"Three hundred dollars." Newton Trout's voice again.

Ralph swallowed. "Four hundred dollars," he called. He noticed a circle of faces near by turning to look at him, and he realized how hoarse and unnatural his voice had been. He glanced over at Mrs. Whidden, who was whispering to Newton Trout. She was shaking her head in negative little jerks.

"Five hundred dollars." It was the clipped tenor voice from the front again. Ralph couldn't see the owner.

"Seven hundred dollars," he declared loudly.

The words had scarcely left his lips when the unknown man offered one thousand dollars.

"Eleven hundred."

"Twelve hundred," countered the resolute voice at the front.

Newton Trout had definitely dropped out of the bidding. The audience began to sense that a duel was on between the man in the front row and the heavy sunburned man leaning against the side wall, and with the memory of Brotherton's words there was a lessening of the party-like atmosphere in the room. Everyone became still and suspenseful. Brotherton stood silent on the stage, like a black raven of doom, the case clasped in his hand.

Ralph was puzzled. *I have the impression that two persons in this audience are determined* Brotherton had said. Who was the man in the front row? Then the words of the letter he had found in Mrs. Whidden's suitcase swept across his mind: "A friend of mine is leaving here for Mexico soon, and from there will go to New York to see you about it. I will let you know how to make sure it is the correct person." Was he the man, and had he arrived only to see Mrs. Whidden donate the case to the auction? The timing was ironic. But who else could it be? It must be the emissary from F. It must be.

"Is there a further bid," Brotherton was saying, "or does this gentleman——?"

"I bid fifteen hundred dollars," Ralph called to him. Again he had the sensation that everyone was looking at him, the necks stretching, the hundreds of faces turning and gaping. From the side of the platform where she knelt with her camera, Eve's face, too, turned, her eyes wide and startled, her hair mussed like a child's above her forehead.

"Three thousand dollars," came the now-familiar, inevitable voice.

The faces turned away again in one large movement, like spectators at a tennis match.

Ralph calculated his cash resources swiftly. He could go on for a while. He could borrow from Eve, from his boss at Worldspan, but what was the use? No matter how much he had, they would have more. When the stakes were as high as they knew these to be, they would be prepared to go to any length. Spending a few thousand dollars would be considered simple indeed if the case were to be possessed that way. No, thought Ralph, he would have to get it by another method. He remained silent. The disappointed waiting faces turned from him to the platform.

Brotherton said, "The silver cigarette case goes to the gentleman in the front row for three thousand dollars. Good luck and I thank you, sir."

A sigh went through the audience and then the murmur of conversation. Brotherton was already selecting the next object to be put on the block. Ralph watched as the new owner of the case went over to the desk where Mrs. Percy sat. He was a medium-built man with frizzy iron-gray hair and a moist-looking pink complexion. He put something down in front of Mrs. Percy, and Ralph knew from her stunned face that it must be the three thousand dollars all in cash. He watched with avid eyes as the purchased article was passed into the stranger's hands.

"What are you going to do now?" came a whisper at his elbow. It was Eve.

"Follow him," Ralph answered, his own voice scarcely audible. "Follow him and get it."

"Must you? Must you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm coming with you."

"No."

"I'm sure I can help. Don't shut me out, Ralph. I love you and I'm afraid for you."

She did pick the damnedest moments to say such things, he thought happily with one part of his mind. The other part was concentrated on the movements of the man up front. By now the crowd had forgotten about the slightly eerie competition it had just witnessed. It was busy appreciating some remarks Brotherton was making about a warming pan of the Queen Anne period. The man had pocketed the case and put on his overcoat. Now he was moving between the crowded rows to the main doors of the ballroom. Ralph pushed open the side exit near which he was standing and with Eve after him hurried around to the lobby just in time to see the man break into a rapid trot, his stiff gray Homburg jammed on his head, his coattails flapping behind him.

He left the revolving door spinning as he rushed down the front steps toward a taxicab standing at the curb. A marine cradling a slender tissue-wrapped package in his arms was stepping from the car. The man shoved him aside, spoke a few words to the driver, and leapt into the cab.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" yelled the marine. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" He turned toward the group at the door, his face flushed an angry red. "What do you make of that!" he spluttered. "He could of broken this vase I got here. It's worth plenty of dough too."

The doorman shrugged. "It takes all kinds, Bud. Maybe he had to catch a train."

"He told the driver Madison and Lapham Street. That's no train. I bet he's skipping out on his bill, that's what." The marine shifted his burden tenderly onto his other arm and walked into the hotel.

"Madison and Lapham Street," Ralph repeated to Eve.

"Yes," she said. "I think we'd better go and buy a gift from Roselle."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THEY WAITED ACROSS THE STREET on the corner and watched the entrance of the shop. No one went in or out for several minutes.

"It's ridiculous," Eve said finally. "You can't go in. You've got to let me go. What could happen to me? I want a—a water pitcher! So I walk into a shop in broad daylight on a busy avenue and buy one. What's dangerous about that?"

"I'd feel better if there were a few other customers on the premises."

"If it will help you to find out if that man is in there I'm going in there." She hesitated. "But what if we get the fellow and the case isn't on him? What if he's hidden it by this time?"

"Not a chance. He's got to have it with him and he's got to get it back to his pals as quickly as possible. You see it's——" Ralph paused abruptly. "He's got to get it back there, that's all."

"And you've got to prevent him?"

"I'm going to prevent him."

"You were serious the other night at the Athenian Room? You would commit a murder to get that case?"

"Eve, listen." Ralph put his hand on her arm and moved back with her so that they stood close to the entrance of the corner building. "I've stopped you from asking questions and you've been a good sport about it. But if you want to get mixed up in this with me, you ought to know what it's all about. I must tell you now before you go any further. It's not a game."

"I never thought it was."

"A moment ago you were skeptical about my remark in the Athenian Room."

She looked up at his familiar square face, at the brown eyes squinting at her, at the bruise that discolored his cheek.

"You, Ralph—you—and murder!"

"Yes. That's it exactly."

She thought of Alexis' words in the canteen the night before, and the world seemed to withdraw from her. Snow was falling in huge sticky flakes, softly like snow in a dream, and the people passing looked like strange birds in their crests of snow. The sound of the cars in the street was muted and far away.

Ralph read the reaction in her face. "That's the way I feel too," he said, "when I'm standing on an American street with you. Things that are violent and unnatural don't fit into the picture. All the same you've got to make the adjustment, Eve, you've got to make them fit. If I can't recover that case without killing someone, I'm going to kill."

"But why? Why?"

The question seemed to be wrenched from the very core of her.

"Let me tell you quickly before you make up your mind to walk across the street. There was a French patriot named Jauvais. When it was sure that France would fall, his friends who believed that there would be a settling of accounts with the Nazis someday brought him a great deal of gold which they had gathered in small and large tions and you've been a good sport about it. But if you want to get mixed up in this with me, you ought to know what it's all about. I must tell you now before you go any further. It's not a game."

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She said, her lips scarcely moving, "It's in the engraving on the cigarette case."

Ralph nodded. "Jauvais was a silversmith. He made many cases—the one I have, for example. He merely made another like it with a map hidden in the design. It was something he could carry on him innocently."

"What happened?"

"Jauvais was killed and robbed in Algiers on the way to hand over the case to the men who should have it. Professional thugs—they didn't know anything about the case, as I found out last night. One of them gave it to his girl friend for a present. Our Mrs. W. But in the desperation to recover it some word must have leaked out. When the killers realized what they had had and lost they laid plans to get it back. The man we think is in there"—Ralph motioned toward the shop—"is the plan."

"I see. The case is the only key to all that money and——"

"It isn't the money alone—and let me tell you it's a staggering sum—it's what it gives to those people who know about it"—Ralph hunted anxiously for the words to explain to her—"a kind of tangible dignity. The hopes they have for rebuilding, for starting again—well, they're more than hopes because that money is there. I haven't time to tell you all of it. But those men waiting and fighting over there are my friends. Jauvais was my friend. They're more real to me now than you are."

Eve looked past him at the gray stone wall he leaned against. She was remembering last night. After they had eaten the sandwiches and drunk the coffee and stretched out in the deep chair before the fire, she had sensed a nervousness in him, a stiffness, and in spite of what he said, all the polite clichés, this is what I've dreamed of, darling, she knew he wasn't satisfied. He was marking time until he could get away to something else.

Now he blurted out, "Don't be hurt, sweet. Try to understand."

"I do understand," she said, knowing that in a way he was suffering and afraid. "You mean until it's won and done with you have to be in it. I'm glad you feel that way, Ralph. I'm glad." She drew her hand away from him and straightened her beret. "Now I'm going across the street to buy a water pitcher. I'll take a good look around. I'll even manage the back room somehow. You wait here."

Before he could answer her she was caught up in the crowd on the sidewalk.

The shop was larger than it had seemed from the street. The main floor was filled with display tables and a curved stairway led up to a balcony that held a kind of art department. From where she stood near the entrance Eve could see stacks of canvases and a part of the back wall covered with framed prints. At the rear of the main floor beige curtains hung from the ceiling to the rug. They were pushed aside, and behind them was visible a chair and a table holding a telephone and a flurry of tissue paper and gift ribbons. From somewhere back of the curtain, too, came the hesitant clicking of a typewriter.

There were no other customers in the shop. Eve moved over to one of the tables and stood looking down at rows of highball glasses enhanced by painted ladies dressed in painted black lace. She picked one up. Sure enough, from the inside of the glass the lady appeared pink and luscious without the lace.

"May I help you?" The voice was modulated to a tone of cultured hauteur.

Eve whirled around guiltily and faced a woman, Roselle, she presumed, in an orange dress. The woman, who was young, had light blue eyes, and sharp pointed lips outlined in orange lipstick. Her hair was dyed a flamboyant coral color. She looked like something that might have been painted on a glass herself. The typing in the back room had stopped.

"Are you interested in glasses?" The light eyes bored coldly at the one in Eve's hand. Eve thought, it's as if she caught me looking at a naughty post card. Her cheeks burned as she set the glass down.

"I'm—I'm looking for a water pitcher," she answered. "Something quite simple."

The orange creature's glance seemed to be adding up the price of her coat and hat. Or was it doing some more important figuring? Eve squirmed inwardly under those eyes. Oh Lord, she prayed, make me look like a girl who wants a water pitcher. Evidently she passed the scrutiny, for the woman started leading the way to the back of the shop.

"Our stock is low at this time of the year," she said, and her voice was louder than was necessary for just Eve to hear, "but I'll show you what we have." She picked up an etched glass decanter. "I think this is a gracious piece, don't you? Thirty-five dollars."

Eve admired it. "But," she protested, "I'm afraid that's a little higher than I wanted to go." She heard the hesitant clicking of the typewriter in the back room begin again.

Roselle's attitude had become definitely disinterested.

She surveyed the shop for a moment. "I can show you a copper one at twenty dollars," she said. "It's more of a decorative object, however. You wanted something to use at the table, is that it?" She glanced around indifferently. "Really I'm afraid we haven't——"

Sensing that she might be dismissed from the shop on the pretense of lack of stock, Eve protested, "Oh, it needn't be a pitcher! It's for a gift. Perhaps something else——" She looked about with pretended helplessness, trying to give the other no reason for wondering why she didn't leave. The noise of the typewriter had stopped.

The woman was moving slowly between the tables toward the show window. As she followed that aloof back Eve tried to think up a convincing reason for getting into the back room. If she asked to use the telephone she would have to phrase her request urgently.

"This Mexican ware has just come in," Roselle was saying. (I know, Eve thought, yesterday.) "We were fortunate, by a special arrangement, to get this shipment." (A very special arrangement, thought Eve.) She reached for a pitcher. "Now here is a piece I'm very fond of—hand-blown blue glass. Fifteen dollars." She held it up to the light.

Their glances went simultaneously to the pitcher and out through the window to the street. There at the curb in the brilliant winter sunlight stood two men. They stood relaxed, talking, as any two men who meet by chance might stop to exchange news of each other. One of them was Ralph, the other was the man from the auction, the man who had the cigarette case. If it had been he typing in the back room he must have left by another door and walked around the corner right into Ralph's arms. But why were they standing there in such apparent friendliness? Why the smile stamped across Ralph's face? A second later Eve understood. A third figure joined the two of them, shaking Ralph's hand and clapping him on the back. Ralph made a gesture of introduction toward his companion and the third man shook his hand too. Then with a few more words and a wave he went on up the street. It was like watching an old-time silent movie. The pantomime looked so exaggerated and obvious.

Eve tore her eyes away and glanced at the woman beside her. The haughty blue gaze was already on her, and under it Eve felt her face bead with perspiration.

"Yes, yes," she murmured, "that pitcher will do very well, I'm sure."

"Do you prefer to have us send it out?"

Eve fumbled for some bills. "I'll take it with me," she said, watching her own hand going through her purse as if it were something quite separate from her, "and I'd like it wrapped as a gift, please."

"Certainly. Do you wish to include a card?" The voice was politely mocking now.

Eve nodded.

"Over there." The orange creature indicated a little desk near the side wall. Eve took one last look through the window. Ralph was still smiling, but the expression seemed frozen on his face like a mask. And there was something menacing in the set of the other man's shoulders, the tight way he kept his arms to his side and his hands in his pockets.

Eve was bending over the desk, automatically scratching words on a small white card, when the door opened. It was a woman bundled up in furs with a cigarette in her mouth. Roselle, still carrying Eve's pitcher, hurried toward her.

"I'm sorry," she said; "we're closed for the day."

The new customer let out a squeal of dismay.

"I just wanted to pick up some little thing. I won't be a minute, honest." She took the cigarette from her mouth and tapped the ashes onto the rug. "It's for my sister-in-law, and I don't care what it is, you see——"

"I'm sorry. We are closed now. I'll have to ask you to come back some other time."

"All right. If that's the way you feel about it. I'll damn well never come back." She gave her furs a shake of defiance as she swept them about herself and started for the door. At that moment Ralph and the other man pushed past her and entered the shop.

"Hey," she called, "they're closed! They don't want business."

The men paid no attention to her. Eve stood numbly by the desk, clutching the fountain pen, watching them make their way toward the rear of the shop. Ralph made no sign of recognition toward her. He was walking a little ahead and his companion pressed close behind him. In one agonized flash Eve understood that the other man must have a gun jammed into Ralph's back.

"Hey, what is this!" shrilled the woman at the door. "How come you're open for the gents? Or are they the night watchmen?" She giggled as she left. Roselle ran to the door and pushed the bolt. She pulled down the shade and drew the curtains across the show window. The men had disappeared into the back room.

Eve's ears ached with the silence. She felt as if her whole body was a raw, quivering, waiting mass of nerves. When the crash of the first shot came it was like a whip laid across her. She heard the sharp, horrified intake of her own breath, and then she saw Roselle lift the blue pitcher and bring it down with an echoing crash. The cruel jagged edge of blue glass was held like a weapon close to her, orange lips were parted, and the incongruous cultured musical voice was saying, "Don't make a sound. Don't move. Don't move a single inch."

Another shot rang out from the back, and they heard the sounds of a scuffle, the sharp, brittle noise of cracking wood, and the heavy thud of an overturned table. The beige curtains rippled and bulged as one or another of the combatants fell against them. The glassware on the tables tinkled merrily with the vibrations. No human sounds came from the back room at all—only the horrible impersonal noise of inanimate objects meeting with violence—as if a small hurricane had entered the place.

As abruptly as it had begun the uproar was over. There was a moment's silence and the slamming of a door. In the closed and shadowy shop the two women stood facing each other. Eve swayed dizzily and leaned against the wall. She was half conscious of the orange dress backing away from her, the jagged blue glass receding, and then her eyes closed and she slumped over the desk.

The bang of a door slamming again roused her. She pushed herself up and stood blinking in the half light. Then, remembering, she ran through the shop and flung aside the curtains. A man lay on the floor. It wasn't Ralph. She fell to her knees beside the limp, huddled body of the man from the auction, the tears running down her cheeks, and she shouted exultantly and silently to herself, "He's safe! He's safe and away!"

Somewhere from the back of her head, as if from a great distance, a voice was warning her, "You must get out of here. Get out of here at once . . ."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFTER THE AUCTION hot coffee and sandwiches were served from the tables at the front of the room. Photographers circulated busily with their cameras, and the gossip columnists grabbed at the big news of the day—the revelation that Newton Trout was engaged to the unknown and attractive Mrs. Whidden. No one was quite sure who she was. A few ocean commuters announced they had met her in Cannes or Monte Carlo, but only fleetingly. They recalled she had seemed more like a Frenchwoman surrounded always by a group of shadowy and fabulous Europeans. Even the ones with long memories were stymied as to what her connections were before she went to Europe. But if they could find no family, no background for her, they all agreed that she was extremely handsome. Clever, too, someone said.

Charlotte's triumph blossomed. She accepted with a pleasure she hadn't felt since the old days the admiration, the congratulations, and the appraisal in the eyes of other women. Her terror and despair of the day before were almost forgotten. Even being rid of the mysterious cigarette case made her feel more secure. She had broken with the past entirely. Entirely. The momentary dread she had felt at Brotherton's remarks about the case and the fierce burst of bidding on it afterward faded too. If the case had some wizardry conected with it, F. had never revealed it to her. She was content to let those others, whoever they were, take it in hand. F.'s silence had lasted for months now. He had abandoned her. He might be dead. She thought of his dapper, sadistic face lying as quiet in death as she had often seen it in sleep. She thought of it without regret as she remembered the smiling curly-haired chap with the square white teeth who worked in the Café Marie in Algiers. He had worn a striped basque shirt and the column of his throat had risen out of it, bronze and delicately hollowed. F. must have killed him, as he had the others. Garroted him with a twist of rope. Yes, she had hated F. since the day his letter came with its deliberately superfluous news about the singer of the Café Marie. The boy had been harmless, his beautiful body penalized by a dim wit. He had done nothing but smile and wipe the tables and sing love songs all night in the café. And F. had killed him simply to remind her that it did not do for her to look at any man with favor. To remind her that she was enslaved, even three thousand miles away from him.

Yes, she hoped F. was dead and she was rid of him, rid of all of them. She saw the course of her life behind her like a graph, a series of pinnacles and valleys. This was the last peak, not so high as some of the others, of course, but it would do very well. The empires of Dupras and Baron Von Afeldt had been fantastic and limitless. Newton Trout's was definitely bounded, but it was enough—enough for the rest of the years.

There was something challenging to her, too, in his calculation and conceit. They matched her own. She would enjoy parrying with him. Relief in her good fortune surged up in her.

A waiter passed close by with a tray and she heard a voice say, "No sandwiches, thank you. But more coffee, black, if you please." The accent was French, but one heard such accents by the dozen all over New York. She didn't know what made her turn a moment later to look at the speaker. He was not much to see really—thin, nondescript. His eyes met hers for an instant and flickered away. She turned back and slipped her arm through Newton's.

Several times as they moved about the room in the next quarter hour she looked up to see the Frenchman. It appeared that he was following them, although he had remained several feet away and did not meet her eyes again. A vague anxiety tugged at her. She told herself that the man had obviously come there to attend the auction. He had no reason to be interested in her. And yet—in the back of her mind was the newspaper description of the Frenchman wanted for questioning about the Lejeune suicide, the Morin street accident. Slender, medium height, about forty, the paragraph had said, brown hair and eyes. Oh, it was ridiculous. A description of a million Frenchmen. She was imagining bogeys. She turned back to Newton, the muscles of her face adjusting to a smile. They were going to be married. It was real. It was happening.

Newton was searching for Eve. "I can't understand it," he told Charlotte. "She was here just a while ago. She's never gone off in the middle of something like this before." He was stretching and peering about through the packed room. "I can't understand it," he repeated querulously. "I wanted to suggest some things to her." The noiseless flash bulb of another photographer went off near them and he turned. "Damn it, everyone else in town is covering this thing but us. That girl's been acting very peculiar the last few days——" He paused, and his tone changed to one of astonishment. "Wait a minute," he said; "I think I see a chap I know. If it's he—— It can't be!" He started to pull her along with him through the crowd. "This is unbelievable! Claude, Claude," he called.

Charlotte looked past his shoulder at the man who turned and acknowledged the name with an upright gesture, almost a salute. It was the Frenchman she had noticed before. The weight lifted from her. So that was it. He was a friend of Newton's. It was Newton he had been watching, not her. They had come face to face with him by now, and Newton was shaking his hand.

"Claude," he was saying, "this is a great surprise. When did you get to America? Why didn't you call me? Have you forgotten that you promised?"

The Frenchman's face lighted with diffident pleasure. "That was so long ago, Newton," he said. "I thought you might have forgotten."

"Nonsense. It was all settled. When you came to America you were to work for me. We must talk about it. When did you come? Is Mathilde here? And the children? They must be grown by now!"

"No," the Frenchman shook his head. "I am alone." His eyes left Newton and rested on Charlotte.

"Claude, I have a surprise for you too. I want you to know my friend, Charlotte Whidden. We are to be married." He turned to Charlotte. "This is Claude Couture. We met on shipboard and went around the world together, and he promised to come to America. He was a very bright young man then—but lazy. You see, it has taken him ten years to get over here and accept my offer. You have come for that, haven't you, Claude?" The smile left his face for a moment. "Mathilde and the boy and girl—they aren't being—detained anywhere, are they? All of you are safe, aren't you? I tried to communicate with you through the Red Cross, but——"

"Thank you, Newton. It was impossible to get messages—things were in such confusion. We are all—well, yes, you might call it safe now."

"Good. Now you two wait here a moment. I've got to find my photographer and then we'll get out of this crush and have a real talk. By the way, Mrs. Whidden lived in Paris for a number of years, Claude. Maybe you have some mutual friends. Now don't move and I'll be right with you."

They stood pushed close together, facing each other, the plates and cups in their hands, around them the loud babble of voices and the constantly shifting crowd.

"You have spent a long time in France, madame?" Alexis asked politely. Now that he actually confronted her, hearing her voice, looking into her face, he experienced none of the excitement of the night before. He had built her up in his mind as a giantess of evil, an adversary spouting flames. She was merely a woman. He watched her sip the coffee. He saw the wetness of the drink on her lips and the swallowing motion in her throat. Her eyes looked past him as she answered.

"For quite a while, monsieur."

Her tone was guarded. It said: "Do not think we have anything in common. Questions, names, recollections will not be tolerated."

His hand was thrust into his pocket where the note lay. He felt the dry, smooth paper between his fingers. In imagination he felt the outlines of the words written on it and he was reassured. One glance and she would not be so disinterested in him. The eye reads, the mind comprehends, and instantly the glands are at work, the heart pounds, the throat constricts. One glance and she would be a creature of terror. His creature.

"Do you plan to return?" he asked, insisting on his own presence, on the thread of contact.

"I'm American," she said, almost visibly withdrawing herself from what she took to be his refugee status. "I might return for a visit, but this is my country."

Your country! he thought contemptuously. Pity the land you call yours.

A waiter in a stiff white jacket stopped before them with a tray of hot canapés. Alexis saw the greed in her eyes as she surveyed the fragrant offerings and the denial of her gesture. Eat, he wanted to urge her, this once eat and forget the body's carefully preserved shape. Soon it won't matter to you or to anyone. Close your teeth on the smooth rich pâté. Feel and taste for the last time, and look at the faces and breathe deeply of the good cigarette tobacco, all for the last time.

Then Newton was back, looking exasperated.

"They say Eve left a while ago with Ralph Morley," he told them. "I'll be glad when that chap goes off somewhere again. He's raising havoc with my photography staff." He shepherded them toward the door. "I've been afraid he'd marry Eve ever since they met, and that wouldn't be good. It's distracting enough when it happens to the editor."

They left the ballroom and went outside to hail a taxi.

"You'll join us for dinner tonight, of course," Newton said to Alexis.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to. Not tonight."

"Oh, come now, old chap. You can break your date whatever it is. This is important. I have a lot to talk to you about. I warn you I'm not going to take no for an answer this time."

"I'm sorry. It is something I cannot dismiss. An—an obligation."

Newton looked at his watch. "What the deuce!" he exclaimed. "The whole afternoon's shot. I'd say come up to the office now, but I've called a staff meeting for four. How about tomorrow morning? I want to show you around and we'll go out to lunch afterward."

Alexis pretended to accede. "That's much better. I'll telephone you in the morning."

"You get in, Claude"—Newton motioned to the waiting cab—"Charlotte goes to the Larchmont. She'll drop you wherever you want."

"But aren't you coming?" Charlotte asked, feeling an undefined alarm at the thought of riding alone with this stranger.

"I'll walk over to the office. It's turned clear. Anyway, I've got to get a little speech in order for the meeting." He closed the door for them. "See you at six, Charlotte."

"Where do you want to be driven?" Charlotte asked.

"Wherever you're going will be convenient."

"The Larchmont is at Sixtieth Street."

"That will be all right, thank you."

Charlotte directed the driver. Automatically she searched for a cigarette, and then she remembered the case was gone. She had a pang seeing the unaccustomed empty look of her bag, but no use to think of that now.

"Do you have a cigarette, Monsieur Couture?" she asked.

Alexis brought out his own ragged pack.

"Perhaps you will have time for one more, after all," he said.

Charlotte withdrew her hand.

"What?" she said. "What did you say?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IT HAD SNOWED in the early afternoon and now the sun was shining. The car passed through the blue shadows on the side street and turned into the dazzling glare of the Avenue. Brightness poured down on them like a spotlight through the glass-covered opening in the taxi roof. Charlotte glanced upward at the tall buildings and thought, he's going to kill me. She stared at the ruled lines of the towers and the precise marching rectangles of the glittering windows and the swatch of blue sky above. It's daylight on the streets of New York, she thought. This can't be happening to me.

In disbelief she looked down at the stranger's hand lying on the worn, brown leather seat, the palm turned up and relaxed. She examined the detailed crisscrossing of lines on it as if she were a fortuneteller. His raincoat sleeve had slipped up a little and part of his wrist was exposed. It was thin, and the network of veins across it showed deep blue against his white skin. It looked fragile and harmless lying there, like the wrist of a sleeping child. Her glance traveled up the wrinkled sleeve to his shoulder, to the loose tattered threads where something had been torn away, then to the stretched concave skin of his cheek, to the delicate in-and-out movement of his nostrils, to his eyes. They were immobile, dark brown, finding her own glance and holding it. After a long, still caught moment his lashes twitched, and she started, as if he had made a violent movement.

He said something, but she didn't hear the words. She stared hypnotically at his mouth—as the lips opened and closed and were thrust forward in the movement of speech. They seemed to be magnified before her like an enormous close-up in a movie—a surrealist movie made years before by a smart young man in Paris—the mouth covering the screen, the lips fading gradually into the spreading petals of a flower. The camera had shown a tiny shimmering insect moving along one petal, its lens following the insect's progress, the suspenseful raising and dropping of each hairlike leg. Suddenly the petals had swooped tightly shut, and the victim was trapped.

She had uttered a short cry sitting in her seat there in the darkened cinema, and she must have made the same sound now, for the lips moved faster, and he was leaning forward to address the driver. An instant later the cab was filled with the blandishments of a radio voice.

Do you wear the shining halo that is every woman's birthright? Is your hair truly your crowning glory? Do you have the soft silken lustrous locks that . . .

Charlotte shuddered and tore her eyes from her companion's face. The cab had stopped for a red light near a newsstand on the corner. A girl in a heavy black sweater stood beside it stamping her feet and blowing on her fingers. Their glances met—the living one in the sweater, the dead one in the mink. In a few hours, Charlotte thought, the news of her own death would be on the front pages of all the newspapers clipped to the wire over the stand, this very girl clutching the pennies people paid to read it. Would she think with envy then of the furs and the heated taxi? Charlotte imagined the papers being read and thrown away, blowing around street corners, abandoned on bus seats. Tomorrow her face would be staring up from the bottom of a wastebasket, from beneath a bologna sandwich, from a laundry floor, from any of the thousand places where a used newspaper comes to rest.

Try the fingernail test, the radio voice was pleading. *Look for the telltale flecks on the shoulder of your dress. See if you, too, suffer from dry stringy hair which . . .*

Charlotte thought of Vincenti, the hairdresser, the student of judo, the intense and insistent lover. She saw again the huge body of last night's burglar hurtling through the air. But Vincenti wasn't there to help her now. No one could help her: not Marcel, nor Auguste, nor Manfred. They were all behind her, broken or dead. Not F. No one. This was the end.

Her glance fell on the license picture of the cabdriver fastened to the partition in front of her. His number was 1758. Beneath the visor of a crumpled cap showed a stout, shiny face, gimlet black eyes cushioned above the cheeks.

If she should lean forward and plead for aid from number 1758, if she should scream louder than the hair-tonic salesman on the radio—— She took a deep breath and looked around her. Shafts of sunlight filled with dancing specks of dust poured into the cab. A wrinkled gum wrapper lay on the floor. Her companion's arm in its threadbare tan sleeve had not changed its position. She heard the handle of the door rattle as they jolted to a stop and she stared out of the window. They were in front of the Larchmont.

It had been a crazy nightmare. The ride was over and he hadn't touched her. She was home and safe. The sight of the familiar entrance, of the doorman's blue-and-gray uniform, of the people passing unconcernedly through the revolving doors, revived her. It was so real, so ordinary out there. In the cab she had been having a bad dream. She rubbed her hands over her face, as if to wipe the memory away, and stepped to the sidewalk almost with resiliency. Snow oozed through her sandals, and she thought, quite calmly, she must change her stockings when she got upstairs. First she would say good-by to the French gentleman, the friend of Newton's to whom they'd offered a taxi ride. She half turned to do so, but his slender, shabby figure was already beside her. The cabman raced his motor and pulled away. Panic came over her in a black wave as her companion's hand pressed into her arm and guided her toward the door.

The doorman was a grandfatherly fellow with a broad, weatherbeaten face. She had never paid much attention to him before, but now she saw that his blue eyes were small and unconfused and kind.

He recognized her and touched his cap.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Whidden," he said. "Mighty nice to get a little sun, eh?"

She staggered, and the doorman caught her other arm.

"Help me, help me," she murmured through her stiff, cold lips. She saw the blue eyes glance knowingly over her head. Too many cocktails in the old girl, said the eyes. And she knew that the Frenchman's brown ones confirmed and met the gaze.

"Careful, careful. There you are."

The door was open. The rush of warm lobby air met them. Before the door closed again she heard the doorman's whistle shriek as he signaled for a cab. He had already forgotten about her.

They crossed to the elevators. A porter stood beside some luggage, waiting. The people to whom the luggage belonged, two women and a bald man, looked at her casually and then became immersed in their own conversation. They were deciding about a telephone call and some tickets for the theater.

Charlotte and her companion entered the mirrored elevator first, his hand a steady tight agony on her arm. When the others got in, Charlotte stared at the three coats in a row in front of her. The black Persian lamb that was the older woman's, the green wool with the raccoon collar that belonged to the younger, the man's gray herringbone. She could lay her hand on any one of them and the head above the collar would turn, the eyebrow raise above the inquiring, curious eye.

"I beg your pardon," she might say, "but this man with me is going to kill me as soon as we get to Room 509. Please help me."

Would the shoulder shrug with embarrassment and the ear turn incredulously away pretending it had heard nothing? Would they nudge each other with a look of sympathy for the man beside her? These people wrapped in the cotton batting of the routine and the normal—to them death and violence would be inconvenient, would interfere with their appointments. It was simpler to think the strange woman drunk or touched in the head.

The elevator stopped at the fifth floor. The three coats moved aside, and the porter pushed the luggage out of the way. They got out and started down the hall. Charlotte's eyes took on the peculiar magnifying ability they had had in the cab. Details filled her vision: a white thread caught in the nap of the rug, the rugs own blue-and-gray diamond pattern, the sun through the venetian blinds striping the wall. Someone was coming down the hall toward them. She saw the burnished leather of officers' shoes, and then the feet stood still and a soft Southern voice said:

"Hello again. Remember me?"

It was the tipsy captain of this noon, only now he seemed quite sober and polite. Charlotte didn't stop to wonder how he came to be there. She ran to him and grasped the lapels of his uniform.

"Help me!" she cried. "He's going to kill me!"

The captain's hands worked gently at her clutching fingers.

"Now, now, ma'am," he reassured her. "This gentleman ain't that ferocious, I reckon. Why don't you go to your room and sleep it off a while?"

"But listen to me," she gasped. "Listen to me. This noon you offered to do something for me——"

The captain frowned and looked questioningly at the man beside her.

Alexis said, "She'll be all right. She needs to lie down, as you said. That is all."

"No, no!" Charlotte sobbed. "It's true, I tell you. Don't leave me alone with him! Call the police!"

"You get the key out of her purse," the captain suggested, "and I'll help get her inside."

When the door was opened, he half carried Charlotte to the couch. She was limp and very pale, and her lipstick was smeared on her cheek and chin where she had rubbed her hand over her face. He put her feet up on a cushion and stood looking down at her.

"Please," she said faintly, "please . . ." She saw his young, smooth, amused face above her as if it were a trembling reflection in a well. Then the tears rose over her lids and streamed hotly down her cheeks.

She heard his voice from the door, ". . . must be a lot of drinkin' goin' on here. Last night I found a guy out flat on his face right there in the hall."

The lock clicked into place, and she lay listening to his quiet footsteps going away.

When she looked around the Frenchman was standing by the window, smoking a cigarette. The sunlight filled the space behind him so she could see only his black silhouette and the curls of smoke drifting upward.

She had heard it said that the soldier cowering under the whine of the bomb above him recapitulates his whole life, that the drowning man sees his past unroll like a reel of film before he dies, that the condemned prisoner lives over everything that has happened to him as he waits in his cell. It was like that with her now. The scenes spun and blurred before her throbbing eyes. She saw a montage of herself in a hundred places, in the yachts, in the casinos, in the villas and apartments and châteaux, descending the marble stairways, promenading at the races, leaning over cocktail tables, dancing in the ballrooms. There was so much money, so many jewels and furs and cars, and lovers who really loved only themselves. Finally there had been no sensation not pursued, no diversion not attained—except power, not over one man or ten, but power over a vague mass of human beings. Boredom and unfulfillment had led her into the game of manipulating destiny and sharpened her taste for it.

Even in the going down, in the losing and fleeing, there had been new exhilaration. She had actually enjoyed defeat, in a way, for then there had been no more restless seeking for what next. What next was obviously to climb back, to recuperate. And in Algiers she had met F., who seemed something different from all the others, as clever and as cruel perhaps, but in a burgeoning physical way—not refined, not decadent. The numbness of success had left her, and she'd begun to be interested again.

Then came the small mistake. A man scratches his finger on a thorn and from it his whole body can sicken and die. It was like that after the murder of Jauvais. So many risks had been taken, so many people had been murdered, yet the death of that one little man started to forge the chain of disaster: the plans went wrong, the information was bungled. She had fled to Lisbon, to America. And this was the last page of the story.

For no reason she could understand a picture of herself as a child crossed her mind, a child roller-skating, chalking out squares for hopscotch, walking through a school yard in buttoned shoes and long stockings; after school the dancing class, the black satin shorts and full-sleeved white satin blouse and the tapping of patent-leather shoes on the floor. Over and over repeated the tapping in front of the mirror, the infantile lasciviousness of twisting shoulders and rolling eyes.

The stranger's voice cut contemptuously across her thoughts.

"If you are weeping for yourself, you need not bother. Nothing is going to happen to you."

She felt the tears wetting the hair at her temples as she lay there. How could she tell him she was crying for a little girl sitting on a bench in a dressing room, crying for the straight cotton underslip and the yellow braids and the blank years stretching ahead? It was like rereading a book, watching the characters grow and hope and dream, and all the time, Godlike, knowing what was inevitably in store for them. Sobs shook her body. She was filled with immeasurable pity for herself.

The stranger gave a short, harsh laugh.

"I have been considering," he said. "I have been weighing and balancing and I find myself in error. Yesterday my only thought was to take your life in exchange for one you had taken. But how can your life begin to pay for his? I've been a fool. How could I settle the account by killing you?"

He walked to the couch and stood over her. She looked up at his drawn, finely modeled face and his mouth stern with the thoughts he was thinking. In spite of her terror she was curious about him. Who was he—this Claude Couture whom Newton had wanted on the magazine? Suddenly, as he spoke, memory jolted into place, and she understood who he was.

"There is only one thing I want from you before I go. Tell me what happened to Paul. Tell me everything. Every detail."

Yes, now she could see the resemblance, and she wondered why it hadn't been apparent before. Paul had been much taller and bigger and lighter in coloring, but the relationship was unmistakably there in the set of his eyes, the way the hair grew about his forehead, the inflection of his speech. Suddenly she wished this man would smile. It would be Paul's smile. She was overcome with an impulsive need to see that face clear again, that face that had haunted her continuously for three short weeks and then been forgotten until now.

"Start at the beginning," the father was commanding her. She stared up at him. The same jagged vein was bulging at his temple. It had been the replica of that vein in his son's forehead which had first drawn her attention. . . .

They had met at a dinner party and she had known from the very beginning—she couldn't explain how she knew unless it was the telltale vein pulsing in his forehead every time Maurice spoke. At any rate, acting a part so much of the time herself, she was more astute at these things than most people. Naturally it had been easy for him because he was handsome. There were not many young men left in Paris at that time, and he was tall and had an engaging smile.

Jeanette Michel and the others were being quite foolish over him. Perhaps it was because he tolerated these women and encouraged them that strengthened her suspicions later. Jeanette was fat and old with neither beauty nor brains. Her money was no more plentiful than the money of—say Nicole—but she had connections, powerful connections, and so it followed she had information too. What would a young man want of Jeanette but information?

It was almost too simple. You set forth the theorem, then you prove it. The young man is only eighteen years old—he is brave but inevitably naïve. For three weeks it is a game with pleasant variations—then he becomes dangerous, there is no more time for either play or pity. The proofs are put in the proper hands. The young man disappears from the dinners, the parties, the boudoirs. The ladies rattle their bracelets and sigh . . .

Charlotte screamed when the father raised his hands over her—and at the sound of it his hands dropped to his sides. They exchanged one long glance and then he turned away. She heard the door close behind him.

She lay on the couch imagining how it would have felt, choking back the sobs in her chest, stroking her throat tenderly with her own fingers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHARLOTTE didn't know how long she lay on the couch after the door closed behind the Frenchman. When she finally got up the room was dark. She staggered over to a table and lit a lamp. Her wrist watch showed five minutes to six, and Newton was invariably prompt. She rushed about the room, straightening it, plumping up the pillows, emptying the ash trays. Three envelopes lay on the rug under the door. She picked them up. Two bore New York postmarks, but the third, smudged with several foreign stampings, was from Lisbon. F., she thought. He was alive. But the knowledge roused no feeling in her. He was something from a shadowy long-ago life. Whatever had bound them together was doubly cut—now that she no longer had the cigarette case and now that she was really going to marry Newton. She threw the letters onto the desk, left the outside door ajar, and ran into the bedroom to dress for the evening.

A few minutes later, when she turned off the shower and called out, Newton answered her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was lying down and fell asleep. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

She heard the clink of a bottle against glass as he poured himself a drink. "Don't hurry," he told her; "I'll take a look at the papers. Where did you drop Claude?"

"Claude? Oh. At—at Fifth and Forty-fifth. He had an appointment around there." She forced a small laugh. "You do have the most amazing assortment of friends, darling——"

"He's a wonderful chap. He looked seedy and washed up today, but don't forget he's been through hell—the war and getting out of France. I think you'll find you have a lot in common when you get to know him better."

"How do you mean?"

"He's extremely clever. He's traveled. He knows every corner of Europe. A dozen languages. He's a real cosmopolitan."

"Thank you, darling."

"It's a wonder you never ran into each other in Paris."

"Yes," she whispered to herself, "isn't it?" Aloud she said, "You know how it is in any big city. One gets immersed in a small group and rarely sees people outside. What did this—this Monsieur Couture do?"

"Work, you mean? Nothing much. He had an income of sorts. He merely lived, and he knew how to do it very well. I wasn't surprised when he turned down my offer. I wanted him to come over here and be my foreign-affairs editor or something like that. He'd have been a useful chap to have in the office."

"Where did you ever run into him?"

"On shipboard. Took a trip around the world in 1932—he and his wife were passengers. She was a charming girl—interested in the theater. Designed sets, I think. They had a little boy with them then. Did he mention his family?"

"No," she said; "no, he didn't."

She patted herself with a huge downy puff. A little boy. Paul was eight years old in 1932. A little boy in knee pants and a blazer racing down the deck. She stood there trying to make the perfumed cloud of talcum shut out the thought of him. She heard Newton calling.

"What did you say, darling?"

"I said where is that jar of olives?"

"Where you put it. With the biscuits in the bottom desk drawer."

"It isn't there."

Olives—olives, the special kind, green-ripe, put up with a touch of garlic, that he liked. He had brought them only the other day and she'd put them in the drawer, as always. They must be there. Then she caught her breath remembering—Mr. Vincenti had liked them too. She began to fix her hair, brushing roughly through the wave, brushing away the pressure of Mr. Vincenti's fingers on her head and the recollection of his glowing eyes, and the dish of olive pits that had still been there that very morning.

"Where would they be?" Newton was asking.

Oh, she detested him, she thought. It was exactly the sort of thing he'd make an issue over—a silly jar of olives.

"I can't imagine. Perhaps the maid—— I've missed other things too——"

She heard the drawer slammed shut, and she shrugged. From the other room came the sound of newspaper pages turning. She held the brush suspended above her head and she asked loudly, boldly,

"Anything more on the French Revenge Killer?"

"Not a peep out of that gentleman. But give him time. I have an idea we'll hear from him again."

"Maybe he's satisfied now and gone."

The doorbell rang. It must be the valet or a delivery. With her finger she rubbed a clear space on the steamy mirror and leaned close to it to draw on her mouth. Newton's voice came through to her indistinctly as he answered the door. After a minute she said:

"Who was it?"

"Flowers, my dear. A corsage, if I'm not mistaken."

She put her lipstick down and stared at her startled half-red mouth. "How nice," she said. "Why would anyone be sending me flowers? Are they from you, darling?"

"I regret to say they're not."

"Oh well," she said. "It doesn't matter who they're from. Probably that furrier on Sixty-second Street. I sent him two new customers last week."

"Probably."

"Not that I expected any thanks. He's an excellent furrier."

There was no answer from the other room. She finished her make-up hurriedly, wrapped a blue satin robe about her, and went into the bedroom.

"I'll be with you in a minute," she called. "As soon as I slip into a dress."

He came to the doorway and stood watching her. There was something in his stance, in the play of the muscles around his mouth that troubled her. She glanced past him and saw on the coffee table the florist's box, its cover off, the bright green paper spilling over its edges.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You opened it." She brushed past him and went over to the table. The three orchids lay huge and garish in their green bed. The petals of one of them clasped a white card. She picked it up. On one side was engraved "Mr. Raymond Anthony Vincenti." The other side bore several lines closely written in ink.

"Not that you expected any thanks," Newton said. "Isn't it odd how the most trivial of favors can inspire such—such florid gratitude?"

She said harshly from between tight lips:

"That was a vile thing to do. To open my private—my personal——"

"It's not ethical, is it?" he interrupted. "But I never pretended to be more ethical than practical. In that we are quite alike, my dear." He picked up his hat and coat.

"Where are you going?"

"I regret that I shall have to cancel our little project. In that case dinner would be rather awkward, wouldn't it? In fact," his tone barely lost its suavity, "any further contact we might have would be awkward."

"But, Newton, you can't! You don't understand what——"

"I'm afraid I do. It's there on the card. In sentimental code, but there, nevertheless."

"So you're calling the whole thing off!" The realization came through to her with a bitter sting. "So you're walking out on me."

He was at the door now, turning the knob. "It doesn't make much difference, does it? Orchids are orchids no matter who sends them."

For the second time in a short while she listened to the so-final sound of footsteps going down the hall. Numbly she walked to the desk where Newton had left the decanter and poured herself a good long drink. The three letters lying where she had tossed them on the tray caught her eye. Instantly she remembered the one from Lisbon. She snatched it up and opened it.

She read:

MY DEAR CHARLOTTE,

A friend of mine left here several weeks ago for Mexico City. Since he intends to go from there to New York City, *I have asked him to call on you and give you news of me. His name is Herman Sperling. In order that you may feel altogether trusting with him, I have allowed him to take my watch for identification—the gold one with the photograph of you in the concealed partition. Please carry out his suggestions to the letter. It is of the highest importance.*

Soon we will meet again. Until then my thoughts are with you.

F.

In bewilderment she read the letter through twice. F. was alive and safe and he wanted the cigarette case. But the case was gone. Sold at auction to an unknown and mysteriously determined gentleman and vanished with him. A laugh bubbled up in her throat, and she threw back her head and let it rasp out. F. and his well-laid plans. What intricate designs, what exertions, what energies he was going to find wasted. For the cigarette case, whatever it was, whatever it stood for, was gone. He'd have to do without it. And Newton was gone. She'd have to do without him. And Claude Couture was gone.

Her fist clenched around the letter. This season she would have Mr. Vincenti, hair stylist, and after him who? And after *him?* The procession would grow meaner and shabbier as time went on. She would have age and fatigue to grapple with as well as other women.

She sank into a chair, seeing in front of her the ominous outlines of the years to come. And she wouldn't die for a long, long time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE TELEPHONE held the center of the small circle of light from the bedside lamp like an actor in a baby spot. Eve sat beside it in the room full of early winter darkness, waiting. But the maddening matter-of-fact instrument would not perform. Finally, in a frenzy of impatience she dialed the Worldspan office. Nobody up there had seen Ralph Morley since he stopped in before noon to say good-by. Did she know he was leaving for overseas the next morning? Oh yes, she knew it, she answered lightly, thank you and good-by. She called Ralph's hotel and listened to the operator make long, futile rings to his room. Where was he? Where had he gone? Where would he be safe? Why didn't he call her? Oh, he was cruel not to call her—not to get her one word. But what if he couldn't call—what if he were hurt, bleeding somewhere? What if the man from the auction had an accomplice? I must stop thinking these things, she told herself. It's only eight o'clock. There's the whole night still ahead. I'll hear from him.

She stood cautiously at the window and peered down into the icy street. Where is he, she thought, in this whole wide city, where is he? She turned away and prowled from one end of the apartment to the other. A vision of the Roselle Shop kept flashing through her mind, of the frightful ruined back room and the bruised, huddled body on the floor, and oddly, too, of the face of the woman in furs who wanted to buy a gift for her sister-in-law. That woman had had a clear look at the two men walking through the shop. She would remember Ralph's face, Eve thought desperately.

She went back to the window and searched the street again. A man's figure standing on the sidewalk caught her eye. The turned-down brim of the hat, the belted raincoat—it was Alexis Durand! He must think her not at home because of the unlighted windows. She snapped on a light, and in a few seconds when she heard his footsteps down the hall she opened the door and waited for him.

He took off his hat and bowed the stiff little bow so familiar to her now and he said almost shyly, "May I come in once more?"

"Of course," she said. "Of course come in."

He walked past her over to the fire. She closed the door.

"Won't you take off your coat?"

"No, thank you. I can't stay. I merely came to say good-by."

"Good-by?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm taking your suggestion. I'm leaving the city." He stopped her question with a gesture. "Not in flight from the police, however. Of my own free will. I must have appeared both a fool and a madman—perhaps I was a little of both."

"What do you mean? Where are you going?"

"I'm going back. I'm going to join the real fight."

"Then you're not——"

"No." He shook his head slowly. "I am not going to bother Mrs. Whidden any further. I was with her this evening, and it suddenly came over me how ridiculous it was to think that cringing puny life could pay for Paul's.

That I should risk my life to kill her would be an insult to my son. You understood all along, of course. There is an old proverb I heard in Italy once—'Revenge is a morsel for God.' It is a good saying, don't you think?" He smiled wryly. "I am going to quit." He held out his hand to her. "Au revoir, Miss Stokes, and again thank you."

"But wait," protested Eve. "I don't even know your name. Your real name."

"I was christened Claude Couture, but since the war I have lived under many names, and changed them often. Will you think it extravagant of me to put it this way?—since I have been Alexis Durand I have in a manner of speaking been reborn. I should like you to remember me by that name."

The telephone bell interrupted them. Eve ran into the bedroom and picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she said anxiously. "Hello?"

"Hello, Eve." The voice was Newton Trout's. Eve's eyes pricked with tears of disappointment. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"No," she said.

"How about joining me? I know a new place on Mott Street—a Chinese general took me there last week and——"

"I'm sorry, Newton, I can't. I have an engagement."

"O.K. It was just a thought. You sound low. Anything the matter?"

"Oh no."

"I looked for you after the auction this afternoon."

"Did you?" she said helplessly, wondering what excuse she could make for having left early.

"There was a staff meeting this afternoon. Did you forget?"

"Well, something terribly important came up, Newton—I'll—I'll tell you about it in the morning. Good-by." By morning, she thought, she'd think up something. Some tale to keep him satisfied.

When she came back into the other room Alexis gasped involuntarily at the expression on her face. He took her hands and pressed her down in a chair.

"Where is the brandy?" he asked.

"In the kitchen. In the left-hand cupboard."

He was back in an instant with the bottle and a glass. "The tables are turned, eh?" he said, frowning as he poured the drink. He watched her swallow it. "And since you are a much more sensible person than I you are going to tell me about it. I beg you—tell me."

At the sound of his firm, gentle voice the floodgates of her speech broke loose. She told him everything—everything she knew or had pieced together from Ralph's explanations—of the story of the cigarette case. He listened until she came to the end, and then he asked a question.

"Did anyone besides yourself and this Roselle see Mr. Morley with the man from the auction?"

Eve nodded. "That's what's so hopeless. Two people saw him. Some friend of his happened to be passing while they were standing on the sidewalk outside the shop. He even stopped to talk, and I saw Ralph introduce him to that man. Then there was a woman who tried to buy something in the shop. Roselle told her the place was closed but she was in the doorway when the two of them walked in. She got a good look at their faces. Once the police find out about the auction and how Ralph bid for the case against that fellow—and then these two witnesses"—she shuddered—"he'll never have a chance. If the body is found early enough he'll never set foot on that plane tomorrow."

Alexis stood up. "Miss Stokes, get your coat and hat. We must go at once."

"Go where?"

"We must go to that shop and make sure there is no evidence pointing to Mr. Morley, no evidence that the dead man even was at the auction or bid for a cigarette case."

"But we can't go back there!"

"We must."

The Roselle Shop was in a small building served by one elevator in a narrow lobby. Off the lobby was a long, arcade-like hallway that ran behind the avenue shops and provided their delivery entrances. Eve and Alexis pretended to study the building index until the elevator had ascended, then they walked rapidly down the corridor. The door was unlocked, just as Eve had left it.

They stepped into the back room and stood side by side in the darkness listening to each other's breathing. Alexis could feel Eve's shoulder trembling where it touched him. He sensed in that one contact that she was on the edge of hysteria, and then he remembered the reputation the waiter in the Athenian Room had given her, and he knew it was a lie. She was neither cold nor emotionless, she was reacting as any woman involved with death and the echo of war and the danger of the man she loved would react. Alexis wanted to comfort her. His head was cleared of doubts and confusion for the first time in many months. It was all so simple. He knew exactly what was to be done.

He pressed her arm reassuringly. "I'm going to find a light," he whispered. "Wait here."

He groped about the room until he found a lamp. It was lying on its side on the floor. He straightened it up and snapped the switch. It occurred to him this was like another performance of a play he had seen many times. The jumbled mass of overturned furniture, the body with its ludicrous sprawled legs, the broken glass, the pictures askew on the walls. How many times in how many nights in how many different rooms he had come upon similar scenes! Only the victims in the past days had been friends; the killers, enemies. Now it was the other way around and much to his liking.

He took a good long look at the enemy's still face. The skull bone at the temple was crushed red and purple. The rest of the skin was paste-white. Stiff little barbs of beard darkened the chin and lower cheeks. The pale, fleshy mouth pouted like a child's at the inconvenience of being killed, and the eyes were half lidded and reproachful. Alexis ran his hands through the man's pepper-colored tweed suit.

"Your friend has taken the case, of course," he whispered to Eve.

He brought out a flat packet of papers from an inner pocket and examined them. "These things it is just as well to leave, his tickets, his business cards, his visa, except for the photograph." He removed the little square picture. "No use making it easy for them to put his face in the newspapers. You'd better take a look at this." He held out to her the white envelope of an unmailed letter.

Eve hadn't moved from her place near the door. Here, she was thinking, is where the two shots I heard were fired at Ralph, here is where he struggled and left a man dead, and fought a bit of the war, only this is a New York shop, not a foxhole, so he is a murderer and a fugitive.

"Come, come, Miss Stokes," Alexis was saying. "We must hurry. We have a lot to do. I assure you everything will go very well. There is nothing to worry about."

"But," she said, "but——"

"No questions now. I will explain everything as we go along. In the meantime you had better read this."

She took the letter from him. It was addressed to a Mr. Felix Aubert in Lisbon. She opened it. The badly typewritten note informed Mr. Aubert that the article he wanted had been purchased in New York for $5000. It asked that a bank draft to supply additional funds for expenses incurred while carrying out this mission be sent to an address in Mexico City.

It was the letter she had overheard being typed in the back room. She showed it to Alexis.

"Didn't you say the cigarette case was sold for $3000?" he asked.

Eve nodded.

"You see, the cutthroats double-cross each other! It is the same old story. If one had the patience, the best solution would be to leave them to the mercy of each other. Put the letter in your bag. You must destroy it later, with the photograph. We must leave nothing around that will inspire the police to investigate what article was purchased. That way will lead them to the cigarette case and to Mr. Morley."

A small lacquered screen hid a washbasin in the corner. Alexis went behind it and came out with two towels. One of them he tossed to Eve. "We will straighten the room," he told her, "and wipe carefully everything—every surface."

They worked quietly, speedily. Their silhouettes cast by the light of the bare bulb made a crazy shadow play along the wall. Once, when Alexis hoisted a heavy steel filing cabinet and it settled upright with a loud bang, they stood rigid with alarm. But no one came and there was no sound in the corridor.

"I think it was this that killed him," Alexis said, examining the cabinet. "From its position I would guess that it fell so"—he demonstrated—"striking him with its edge, then lost its balance and rolled over away from him on the floor." He polished the green steel solicitously with his towel.

"Ah yes," he said. "Now we must find the gun, or do you think Mr. Morley took that with him too?"

"No. He had one of his own," Eve said. "He had planned to use it if necessary. This—this man must have been quicker out there on the street."

"No doubt in better practice."

Alexis put his cheek to the rug and surveyed the floor of the room. In the scuffle the gun had slithered under the typewriter desk. He retrieved it and wiped it off. Then he rolled the body over and placed the weapon by its side.

"A pity," he said, "there could be no verdict of suicide in this case." In his pocket he fingered the folded note he had meant to leave on the body of Charlotte Whidden. He knew the words of it by heart—words that would fit any traitor. He took it out and placed it under the gun. When he straightened up he smiled at Eve's aghast expression.

"No camera this time, Miss Stokes?" Then his face grew somber. "Don't say anything," he warned her. "I thought I would have to travel thousands of miles to get back into the fight. Now it isn't necessary. I can begin like this."

Eve looked at the folded paper beneath the shining black gun barrel and her voice was thick with horror. "If you are found, you will be tried for murder!"

Alexis shrugged. "If I am found——"

"You can't do it. I won't let you do it——" She put out her hand to take the note, but his fingers closed over her wrist in a band of iron.

"Don't be a fool! Think! Think!" he hissed at her. "If it weren't for you—I should have wasted this chance on a worthless, useless woman. You saved me from that. You can't deny me this."

She gasped with pain, but his hand still held her away. "It has nothing to do with you or your friend, don't you understand? I'm doing it for my people back there. The cigarette case must be gotten to them. You've no right to stop me."

He released her at last, and she stood before him with hanging head, rubbing the marks of his fingers from her skin. Finally she said in a low voice, "Why do you say if it weren't for me you would have——"

"Because," he interrupted, "you offered me help and understanding and warmth when I had forgotten they existed. Because you made me feel like a human being when I had turned myself into a robot and denied I was human. Because—in a way I can never translate for you—I love you."

Their eyes met and searched each other's faces in the harsh, unshaded light and saw what was there to see.

He spoke first. "Go directly home now and stay there. And don't worry. I promise everything will be all right. I'll wait here until I know you are well away from the building."

"Good-by, Alexis Durand."

She turned and opened the door and went out.

She waited all night, clenching her hands on her knees, holding them deliberately still, putting on for herself a great show of control, until her watch indicated precisely five o'clock. Not until then did she allow her stiff, cold fingers to dial Ralph's hotel again. She heard some buzzing and a pause and then the operator's voice, somehow carefree, as this morning all voices in the world would seem but her own, said, "Mr. Morley has checked out."

"Oh. Could you tell me when he left?"

"I really couldn't say. Sometime last evening."

Eve hung up and dialed the airport. This time it was a man's voice on the other end of the line, a brisk, unconcerned voice that had just had a cup of coffee.

"Could you tell me if the overseas clipper has taken off yet?" Eve asked.

"Who is this speaking?"

"Eve Stokes, *Photonews* magazine."

"I can't give out any information whatsoever." The voice sharpened. "You ought to know that."

"I'm—I'm sorry. But I'm extremely anxious to reach Mr. Ralph Morley, the Worldspan correspondent. Could you page him for me?" As she said it she imagined the raucous sound of the loud-speaker blaring Ralph's name through the waiting room, calling attention to him in a roomful of people, perhaps setting him up as a target. "Never mind, never mind," she said quickly. She hung up and pushed away the phone.

At six-thirty there was a thump on the floor in the hall. She opened the door. The front page of the morning paper was spread open at her feet. They had given the story the entire left-hand column. FRENCH REVENGE KILLER SUCCEEDS said the head. CLUBBED BODY FOUND BY CLEANING WOMEN. Two gaunt and startled women stared up at her from the photograph, and there was a picture, too, of the note Alexis had left beside the body. Eve stooped and picked up the paper and read the story with a mixture of relief and dread. The dead man's name was Herman Sperling. A temporary Spanish visa had been found on him, but it was thought his nationality was Austrian. He was in New York as the agent for a Mexican exporting firm. His skull had been crushed by some heavy object. Miss Roselle Penning, owner of the gift shop where the body was found, could give no information as to why the murdered man was in her shop that evening. She had closed up at five-thirty, as usual, she told the police, and had gone directly home. She knew Mr. Sperling only as the salesman from whom she had purchased a small order of Mexican peasant ware the day before.

Oh, she did, thought Eve. Well, one might look into that. Yes indeed, there must be a way to uncover the fact that Miss Penning was not so wide-eyed as the ceramic cherubs she sold in her shop. There was a youngster down at the office who not only liked to track down stories but to grab them by the throat and shake them. She'd set him on to Miss Penning with a casual hint or two and he was liable to wrap up Miss Penning and make a gift of her to the F.B.I. So, Eve thought, they'd see if she knew Mr. Sperling "only as a salesman."

The police, the story went on, were convinced that revenge was the sole motive for the murder, since a wallet containing several hundred dollars was found untouched in the dead man's pocket, as was an antique gold watch. Then followed a summary of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Lejeune and Morin, another description of Alexis, and the customary "Chief Burnham of the Detective Bureau is investigating several clues."

Gray morning light was sifting into the room when Eve closed the door. She glanced about her with a stranger's eyes at the silent chairs, the crumpled cushions, the books piled on the tables, the unfocused look of the photographs on the shadowy walls. Was this her room? Were these the materials of her life? *Violence doesn't belong here,* Ralph had said, *but you've got to make it fit, you've got to make the adjustment.*

She walked over to the fireplace. If anything remained of the letter to Mr. Felix Aubert or the photograph of Mr. Sperling it was undistinguishable from the wood ashes. A few coals still glowed. She spread her hands above the meager warmth and recalled the fire she had built two nights before—the welcoming fire that was to melt the resistance of the waiter with the furious eyes and spotted shirt.

While she was standing there trance-like, half lost in reflection and weariness, there was a light, urgent knock at the door. The sound electrified her. She came awake with a sickening sensation in her chest. So soon, she cried silently, are they here with their questions so soon! With dragging steps she went to the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"I have a package for Miss Stokes, please."

Eve turned the knob and confronted a rosy-faced man. He wore a cap with a taxi driver's badge pinned to it and a leather windbreaker. He thrust a small flat parcel at her.

"I recognize you," he said cheerily. "I seen your picture, Miss Stokes. I recognized Mr. Morley too. It's a hobby of mine recognizin' folks, celebrities, whose pictures I seen in newspapers. It makes hackin' more interestin'—when you know who you're haulin' around. I picked Mr. Morley up and took him to the airport a while ago and when he seen I recognized him, we had a very nice conversation."

The man pointed to the package in Eve's hand. "He asked me to drop up here and give that to you on my way back. I would of been here sooner only I picked up a fare. Wanted some address to hell and gone out in Flatbush. Nobody I could recognize either. Just a fare."

"Well," said Eve. "Well, thank you very, very much. What do I owe you?"

"Not a sou, Miss Stokes. Mr. Morley took care of that." He touched the peak of his cap in a little salute. "Glad to have met you," he said. "Good-by now."

Eve took the package over to the table and held it under the lamp. It was wrapped in two white paper napkins marked "Airport Coffee Shop" and secured with a soiled white string. She tore the wrappings off. In her hand lay a gleaming slender silver case. *There's only one other like it in the world,* Ralph had said, *when I get it I'll make you a present of this one.* She laughed aloud, remembering how she had answered. *Don't go to any bother,* she had told him.

She snapped the case open. Inside there were a few particles of loose tobacco and one cigarette. She put it in her mouth and lighted it. Nothing had ever tasted so good.